John T. Irwin

The Poetry of Weldon Kees

Vanishing as Presence

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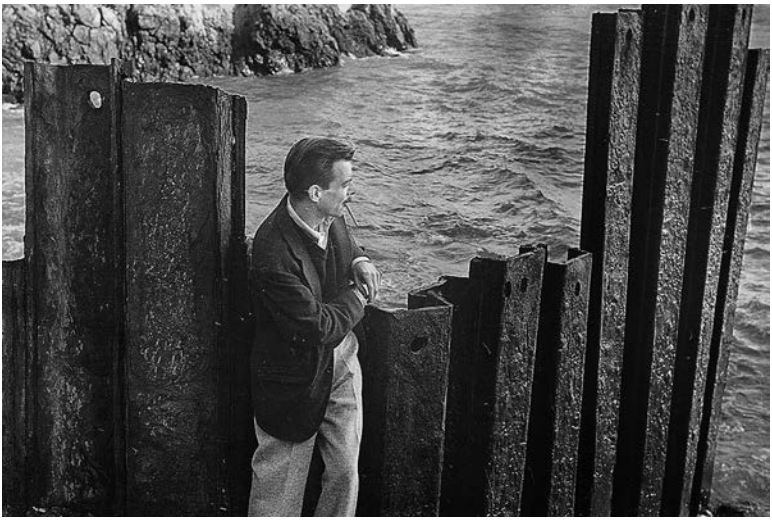
of Weldon Kees



Weldon Kees standing under the Golden Gate Bridge, early 1955. Photograph by William Heick, courtesy of Bill Heick.

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For J. K. R., my oldest friend, whom I have always felt knew as much as I did and therefore had come to the same conclusions as I had about the value and meaning of life, but who was nevertheless brave enough to marry a good woman, Jo Ann, and have three wonderful children, the second of whom, Donna Elizabeth, is my goddaughter.

And for Audrey Joseph and Ida Martin. If there are angels, then these are two. Individuals who once lived and breathed but who now are gone. I may be among the last to remember them, but their names, once inscribed here, will never vanish as long as this book is still read.

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Preface

In 1970 when, as a brand-new PhD in English from Rice University in Houston, I first came to teach American literature in the Department of English at Johns Hopkins University, I used as a textbook in my course on contemporary American poetry an anthology called *Naked Poetry: Recent American Poetry in Open Forms*, edited by Robert Mezey and Stephen Berg. I had just completed my dissertation on Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, finally convincing the powers that be at Rice that Crane was a major poet and that *The Bridge* was a major American poem. No sooner had I arrived at Hopkins to start teaching than I encountered in the Mezey and Berg anthology the work of another twentieth-century American poet whose name I had never heard before and whose work I didn't know—Weldon Kees. I had been hired to teach contemporary American literature because in the previous academic year (1969–'70), so I had been told, there had been a student uprising at Hopkins (this was the 1960s, so it would have been difficult to name a major American college where there wasn't a student uprising). One of the students' nonnegotiable demands was for courses in contemporary American literature. So in the fall of 1970, I started teaching such a course and, using the Mezey and Berg anthology, I first became acquainted with the work of Weldon Kees. His poetry seemed to me so good and so original that I must have vowed then and there that I would write about his work before I was finished as a critic so that anyone who was interested in twentieth-century American poetry as I was would never be in the position of not knowing Kees or his poems.

Years later, I met Donald Justice at the Sewanee Writers' Conference. Don, who was well-known for being somewhat standoffish with strangers, and I hit it off immediately when I told him how much I appreciated his edition of Kees's poems and that I ultimately intended to write about

Kees. Hence the present book is the eventual fulfillment of a lengthy admiration and a long-standing promise.

As part of this introduction, I also want to acknowledge the assistance of several people in finishing the present book. I suffered a stroke in February of 2014 when this manuscript was about half completed. After recovering enough to start teaching again in the spring of 2015, I returned to finishing the manuscript. During this entire time, the care and devotion of my wife, Meme, was one of the things that brought me back. She typed most of the manuscript on a computer that all too often seemed to have a mind of its own. I was also aided in this period by the efforts of a devoted former student, Glenn Blake, who finished the typing and who read over the entire manuscript to eliminate mistakes and typos. I should also acknowledge the kindness and help of Professor Matthew Roller of the Johns Hopkins Department of Classics, who provided me with much of the bibliographical information contained in my interpretation of Kees's poem "Abstracts of Dissertations." I also want to acknowledge the kind assistance of Gabrielle Dean of JHU's Sheridan Libraries, who provided me with information about the dissertations mentioned in Kees's "Abstracts of Dissertations." Needless to say, any of the excellences of the following book are the result of these people's help, and any faults of this text are entirely my own.

The Poetry
of Weldon Kees

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Chapter One

People Who Vanish

How does a person vanish, or more precisely, what does vanishing mean in the case of an individual? And—a related question—why in the twentieth century does the American public gradually become aware of a mounting roll of such people? To answer the first question, vanishing often means that a person of a certain fame or visibility—such as the short story writer and journalist Ambrose Bierce, who apparently traveled to Mexico in 1913 to join up with Pancho Villa's army and observe the Mexican Revolution firsthand—disappears without a trace. Other examples of this type of disappearance—in which a corpse is never found nor a burial site identified and where the circumstances of the disappearance and presumed death remain a matter of speculation—are those of Judge Joseph Force Crater, an associate justice of the New York Suprteme Court, last seen on August 6, 1930, and Jimmy Hoffa, former president of the Teamsters Union, last seen on July 30, 1975. Both men, like Bierce, were the presumed victims of foul play. Their disappearances became the stuff of urban legend or vaudeville quips ("Judge Crater, phone your wife!"), and all three were eventually declared legally dead.

But there is another class of vanishers—one that includes Amelia Earhart and Glenn Miller—whose bodies (as well as the wrecks of the planes carrying them when they disappeared) have never been recovered. The circumstances of these disappearances are well established, as are the dates Earhart and Miller went missing (July 2, 1937, and December 15, 1944, respectively). We know the approximate location where each was lost: Earhart in the central Pacific somewhere around Howland Island and Miller somewhere in the English Channel. But the exact location of each crash remains a mystery, prompting various American expeditions to scour the Pacific islands "in search of Amelia Earhart" in the first case and resulting in the filming of a British television documentary that speculates on the cause of Miller's plane crash in the second. In this category of vanishers would also be numbered the American poet Hart Crane. On April 27, 1932, returning from a year in Mexico, Crane leapt from the stern of the SS *Orizaba* en route to New York City. The time was approximately "two minutes before twelve noon" (Unterecker 758). Crane was observed by several witnesses as he walked quickly to the stern of the ship, removed the topcoat that he wore over his pajamas, and "folded it carefully over the railing." Then, as one observer recalled, he "placed both hands on the railing, raised himself on his toes . . . dropped back again . . . Then, suddenly, . . . [he] vaulted over the railing and jumped into the sea" (Mariani 420). "Man overboard!" was sounded, life preservers were cast over the stern, four boats were put into the water, and the search was carried on for two hours, but no trace of Crane was found. Hart's name and dates are inscribed on his father's tombstone in Garrettsville, Ohio, along with the phrase "LOST AT SEA."

These vanishers' identities were well-known, but their corpses were never found, in contrast to the situation that existed in the wake of the World War I, where numerous bodies of unidentified soldiers were discovered. Like most of the allied countries in the war, the United States passed legislation in 1921 to provide for the burial of an unknown American soldier, and on November 11, 1921, President Warren G. Harding presided over the unknown's interment on the plaza of Arlington National

Cemetery's Memorial Amphitheater. In 1958, unidentified corpses from World War II and Korea were also interred there, and in 1984 an unknown soldier from Vietnam was added, although in this last instance, because of advances in methods of identification, the task of finding an unknown serviceman had become more difficult. In this regard, one thinks of the case of the French writer Henri-Alban Fournier, author (under the name Alain-Fournier) of that magical novel *Le Grand Meaulnes*, who as a lieutenant in the French army was killed in battle on September 22, 1914, on the Meuse Heights. Alain-Fournier's body, buried by the Germans in a common grave along with twenty of his comrades in arms, was only recovered and identified some seventy-seven years later in 1991.

The twentieth century was concerned either with honoring unknown soldiers or with ultimately establishing the identity, three-quarters of a century later, of corpses like Alain-Fournier's. On occasion, certain governments had, however, tried to obliterate corpses and/or their final resting places so that their graves would not become focal points or rallying sites for groups opposed to the government. It was for this reason that the Bolsheviks destroyed the bodies of the Russian czar and his family, and Stalin the remains of Adolph Hitler, and the United States buried Osama Bin Laden at sea.

And then at mid-twentieth century, into this complex of missing bodies and/or missing identities, floated the case of the American poet Weldon Kees (1914–1955), the most interesting poet of his generation. On the night of July 18, 1955, he apparently jumped from the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, having told various friends days before that he was contemplating either suicide or going to Mexico to stay (Reidel 351). On July 19, 1955, his car was found abandoned in the sightseers' lot on the Marin County side of the bridge. No trace of his body was ever recovered—a circumstance that gave rise, as Kees's biographer James Reidel records, to at least one reported Weldon Kees sighting years later in August 1962 at the New Orleans jazz venue Preservation Hall (Reidel 363). (Preservation indeed!) In the absence of a body, Kees had entered a class of urban legend that included, for example, Hitler's being sighted

in various South American countries years after the end of World War II. Or as Kees himself imagined in the poem "Dead March," where the Nazis try to obliterate any trace of the bodies of Hitler and Eva Braun to keep them from becoming trophies for the Red Army:

> Under the bunker, where the reek of kerosene
> Prepared the marriage rite, leader and whore,
> Imperfect kindling even in this wind, burn on.
>
> Someone in uniform hums Brahms. Servants prepare
> Eyewitness stories as the night comes down, as smoking coals await
> Boots on the stone, the occupying troops.

This obliteration leads a few lines later to the inevitable question, "Is Hitler now in the Himalayas?", then to the comment, "We are in Cleveland, or Sioux Falls" and the final insight: "—And not far from the pits, these bones of ours, / Burned, bleached, and splintering, are shoveled, ready for the fields" (Kees, *Collected* 121).

Kees's biographer Reidel confirms that his alternative idea—of escaping by going to Mexico—was an allusion to the fate of Ambrose Bierce. He notes that, during Kees's 1936 stay in Los Angeles, his "conversations seemed always to come around to some recent suicide that fascinated him or some car wreck that involved people with their 'whole lives before them'…He also liked to speculate about what had happened to Ambrose Bierce, who had disappeared in Mexico in 1914 and had been missing for as long as he [Kees] had been alive" (Reidel 48). If Kees's apparent lifelong fascination with suicide had resulted in a decision to turn his own self-inflicted death—considered as an existentialist demonstration of the self's absolute freedom through the performance of that supreme act against the self's own interest—into an aesthetic, an artistic gesture meant to resonate back through the disappearance of fiction writer Ambrose Bierce in Mexico in the year of Kees's birth or the loss of the drowned poet Hart Crane's body, then the best way Kees could have raised the odds that his own body would never be recovered was to jump off the

Golden Gate Bridge at night when the tide was going out. As Reidel notes, the last person known to have spoken with Kees was his friend Janet Richards, whom Kees phoned on the afternoon of Monday, July 18, saying "I may go to Mexico. To stay" (Reidel 351). And in a conversation with his friend Michael Grieg on Sunday, July 17, Kees, "going over the setbacks of recent months, admitted to trying to jump off the Golden Gate Bridge the week before. He had lost his nerve, however. He could not get his foot over the rail" (Reidel 3). Later in their conversation Kees, considering the alternatives of Mexico or the Golden Gate, said "that the country had held a fascination for him ever since he read a biography of Hart Crane" (Reidel 4). Crane had spent the last year of his life in Mexico on a Guggenheim Fellowship ostensibly to write a verse play about the conquest of the Aztecs by the Spanish conquistadors. However, the year had turned into a disaster of increasing alcoholism, depression, and indolence during which Crane produced only one finished poem, "The Broken Tower." He had unsuccessfully attempted suicide in 1931 by drinking, one after the other, two liquids (iodine and Mercurochrome) that he mistakenly believed were fatal poisons. But on the ship back to New York at the end of his Mexico year, a subsequent suicide attempt succeeded. Invoking the poetic allusiveness of Kees's choosing to jump off the Golden Gate Bridge in relation to the drowning of the author of *The Bridge*, Reidel speculates that Kees drove to the bridge sometime during the night of July 18: "The fog may have been rolling in when Kees arrived. It was so thick that evening that it enveloped the bridge, as some of his friends would later remember. He parked in the sightseers' lot on the Marin County side. From there he knew well the footpath that led to the bridge and the railing and how long it took to walk until there was no land below" (Reidel 352).

Since Kees had tried to jump off the bridge the week before, one can assume that he'd given this method of self-destruction a certain amount of thought. He had told Grieg in their last conversation that he wanted to write "a book of famous suicides": "He worked at the Langley Porter Psychiatric Clinic and had amassed a file of suicide notes from there. He

also had typed up celebrity profiles of the poet Hart Crane, the actress Lupe Velez," and the anarchist Alexander Berkman—all dead by their own hand (Reidel 3). If Kees had wanted to maximize the odds that his body would never be found (and thus contribute to the mystery of whether he had gone to Mexico or killed himself), then he would likely have jumped from the bridge when the tide was going out. In a local newspaper—*The San Francisco Chronicle*, for example—he could have found the times of high and low tides contained in a daily feature called "Sun, Moon, Tides." In the *Chronicle* for July 18, 1955, the information in this feature, provided by the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey, Western District, shows the "times and heights of tide at San Francisco (Golden Gate)" for July 18 through July 22. Kees would have seen that there was a low tide at 6:24 a.m. on the morning of July 19. A simple calculation would have told him that the start of this outgoing tide would begin some six and a quarter hours earlier at around 12:09 a.m. The outgoing tide in San Francisco Bay creates a current running from the northeast quadrant of the bay to the southwest and out through the Golden Gate into the Pacific Ocean. The US Coast and Geodetic Survey publication of currents for the year 1955 shows that the time of slack water (just before the beginning of ebb tide) in San Francisco Bay on July 19 occurred at 12:05 a.m. and that the maximum velocity of the outgoing current—5.7 knots, or 10.6 miles per hour, the highest velocity of any outgoing current in the bay for the months of July or August 1955—was reached at 3:27 a.m. Which is to say that if Kees had jumped around midnight on July 18/19, his body would have been carried out through the Golden Gate into the ocean long before sunrise on the 19th. If carried out far enough into the Pacific, his body would have been trapped by the coastal current heading south toward Mexico. Thus, in broaching to friends the possibilities of his going to Mexico to stay or jumping off the bridge, Kees may not really have considered this a case of either/or but a wryly cryptic one of both /and—a type of macabre humor that, to judge from his poetry, Kees was fond of all his life. After all, in Kees's mind Mexico was associated both with Crane's drowning and the mysterious disappearance (and presumed

death) of Bierce. And indeed, many of Crane's friends, after his suicide, thought of his year-long Guggenheim residence in Mexico—which is to say, his choosing to locate in what they felt was essentially a death-haunted culture—as being both the backdrop to, and one of the causes of, the progressive darkening of his mood during the worst year of the Great Depression.

But if Kees, as we've suggested, selected a method of suicide offering the best chance of vanishing without a trace, then what could he have intended this act to convey about his life and work? Some sixty or so years after his death, Kees's name and poetry are still not widely known among the general public, but I have never met a poet or a connoisseur of poetry that did not know and admire his work. As I said, I consider him the most interesting poet of his generation, and part of that interest has to do with the intriguing manner of his disappearance. It has been my observation that people who love his poetry but know little of his life always know about his mysterious vanishing. Indeed, Reidel's 2003 biography of Kees is titled *Vanished Act: The Life and Art of Weldon Kees.* Had Kees simply intended to attach a mystery to his death to pique people's interest and attract them to his poetry, the way Bierce's disappearance in Mexico had for decades kept his memory alive for Kees? Or had his setting up the two possibilities (suicide or Mexico) been meant to suggest the alternatives as being between the rejection of life or simply the rejection of a life's work, that is, the various artistic endeavors to which he devoted himself up to that point? For obviously, if Kees had gone to Mexico "to stay" yet wanted to maintain the illusion that he had died, he would have either had to give up working (which is to say, publishing or exhibiting) in those arts with which he had been associated (fiction, poetry, reviewing, painting, jazz music) or else he would have had to invent a new persona with a different name to continue his creative pursuits. Kees would have known that the latter alternative had already been tried by the mysterious B. Traven, the author of the novel *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, from which John Huston made his 1948 film. The movie won three Academy Awards, and part of Warner Bros.' advertising campaign for the

film played up the fact that no one had ever met or knew anything about the novel's mysterious author, who lived in Mexico. A film buff, Kees had been a childhood friend of Spangler Arlington Brugh, better known later when he changed his name to Robert Taylor and became a movie star at MGM. In the 1940s Kees had also become friends with the film critic James Agee when the two worked together at *Time* magazine. Further, in San Francisco in the 1950s Kees co-hosted with another friend, Michael Grieg, a radio program of film reviews at station KPFA called *Behind the Movie Camera* (Reidel 321), a show on which Pauline Kael, who would go on to become the film critic for *The New Yorker*, often appeared. So there can be little doubt that Kees knew of and had likely seen Huston's *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and been aware of the studio hype about the novel's mysterious author.

As for the true identity of the novelist B. Traven, there are several theories. One is that he was the German-born Otto Feige, who changed his name in the first decade of the twentieth century to Ret Marut when he became a stage actor in various German cities. Marut was also an anarchist who took part in the revolution in Munich in 1919 to establish the Bavarian Soviet Republic. In the wake of the revolution's failure, he was condemned to death and fled, ultimately making his way to Mexico by 1924. Beginning in 1927, the author B. Traven began to publish his German-language novels (many with Mexican settings) with a German publisher who had had anarchist connections. Here the theory becomes more complicated, because if Ret Marut (né Otto Feige) published his novels under the name B. Traven, it seems that he lived his day-to-day life in Mexico using the name Berick Traven Torsvan. When John Huston came to Mexico to film *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, he was met by a man named Hal Croves who said he was Traven's literary agent. Croves remained as a technical advisor on location with Huston through the entire filming, then vanished at the end. Many of the people who worked on the film thought that Croves was Traven, but Huston, though he thought at first that Croves and Traven were the same person, ultimately came to believe they weren't. In the wake of the film's success and the studio

publicity highlighting the mysterious identity of the novelist who wrote *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, a Mexican journalist went looking for Hal Croves. He finally tracked him to a man named Traven Torsvan who ran a small inn near Acapulco. The journalist published his findings in a Mexican newspaper in August 1948, but in an article in another Mexican newspaper later the same month Torsvan denied being B. Traven. Then, like Hal Croves, Traven Torsvan also vanished. When Ret Marut had lived in Germany, he claimed to be a US citizen, born in San Francisco in 1882, who had run away to sea at the age of ten; whereas Traven Torsvan, living in Mexico, had also claimed to be a US citizen, born in Chicago in 1890. Hal Croves later resurfaced in the early 1950s in Acapulco, again acting as B. Traven's representative. Croves married in 1957; he and his wife ran a literary agency in Mexico City that handled Traven's fiction, with Croves's wife ending up as the sole copyright holder of Traven's works. Croves died in Mexico City in March 1969, but the mystery of Traven's true identity has continued to call forth theories ranging from the far-fetched to the ridiculous. One holds that Traven was an illegitimate son of Kaiser Wilhelm II (recall that the mysterious Jay Gatsby was rumored to be a nephew of the Kaiser); another, that B. Traven was an alias of the American writer Ambrose Bierce. One cannot help but be reminded of the decision of J. D. Salinger some ten years later in 1965 in effect to terminate his life as a writer by ceasing to publish.

Bierce's disappearance in Mexico in 1914 (the year of Kees's birth), Hart Crane's failed suicide attempt by poison there during his Guggenheim year and his subsequent successful suicide by drowning on his way back from Mexico, as well as the presence in that country of a writer like B. Traven who had apparently fled his past, kept his true identity a secret, and published under an assumed name were, I would argue, all associated with that country's image in Kees's mind when he decided to stage his death as a mysterious disappearance, telling his friends that he intended either to go to Mexico to stay or jump off the Golden Gate Bridge. But of course in the decades since 1955, there have been no novels or short stories, no poems, abstract paintings, or jazz tunes emanating from

Mexico under Kees's name. Nor have works of a quality recognizably Keesian been published under some other name that could plausibly be considered a pseudonym. So, even though his body was never recovered, it seems fairly certain Kees died sometime on the night or early morning of July 18/19, 1955, by jumping from the Golden Gate Bridge. But he did not die alone. When the California Highway Patrol found Kees's 1954 Plymouth abandoned in "the sightseers' parking lot" at "the north end" of the Bridge "in Marin County," they also found another abandoned car belonging to "Joseph R. Eppler, a salesman, aged fifty-nine, who had left a note admitting to a business failure and including the usual request that he be forgiven for what he was about to do" (Reidel 5). By contrast, the police found no suicide note either in Kees's car nor in his apartment when they entered it. Instead, they found a copy of "Dostoyevsky's *The Devils*, which Kees had been reading . . . placed near his bed beside another book, Unamuno's *Tragic Sense of Life*" (Reidel 5). But more of these books later, when we consider the possibility that Kees had left these two volumes to be found there in lieu of a suicide note. For the moment, let us look more closely at Kees's choice of the Golden Gate Bridge as a means of suicide.

In his book *The Final Leap: Suicide on the Golden Gate Bridge*, John Bateson notes that "the bridge is the top suicide site in the world":

> Since it opened in 1937, there have been more than fifteen hundred confirmed suicides, although the actual number is believed to be well over two thousand. That's because the bodies of many jumpers aren't ever found, they're washed out to sea. Other times the body is found, but far enough away that the death cannot be attributed with certainty to the bridge. Police need evidence to verify a death, and if a body isn't recovered or a jump isn't witnessed, there can't be confirmation, even if personal effects and a suicide note are found. (Bateson 8)

Of those people who leap from the bridge, about one percent survive. As Scott James pointed out in a column in *The Bay Citizen* in 2011, "many cases are not included in the official count because bodies were not found, even when a suicide was witnessed. There were 59 of these unconfirmed

suicides from 2000 to 2010, plus 308 confirmed cases during those years. Additionally, an unknown number of people are believed to have jumped at night unobserved." If the recovery of a body is needed to confirm a suicide, then according to James's statistics, bodies were not recovered in at least 16 percent of these cases between 2000 and 2010, and if one takes Bateson's number of 1,500 confirmed suicides versus what he believes to be "the actual number"—"well over two thousand"—then the figure rises to 25 percent. But for the night and early morning of July 18/19, 1955, the figure was 50 percent—one confirmed, one unconfirmed. As the brief news story, headlined "Probe Suicide Leaps off Bridge," appearing in the *Humboldt* [California] *Standard* for Friday, July 22, 1955, reported:

> Two apparent suicide leaps from Golden Gate Bridge were under investigation today although neither leap was witnessed.
>
> The investigation was initiated with the finding of two cars parked at the north end of the bridge. A suicide note was found in the machine registered to Joseph R. Eppler, 59, a salesman. The other car was registered to Weldon Kees, 35, San Francisco theatrical writer, poet, art critic, and painter.
>
> Friends of Kees told authorities that he had been depressed recently and talking of taking his own life. The note in Eppler's car was addressed to his wife, Myrtle, and said business reverses had caused despondency.

The article gets Kees's age wrong—he was 41, not 35; and the designation of him as a "theatrical writer" reflects Kees's involvement as writer and performer in the San Francisco revue *The Poets' Follies of 1955* in January and the performance of his play *The Waiting Room* at The Showplace on Folsom Street that April.

While Kees's body was never found, Eppler's apparently was. In the California Death Index, Joseph R. Eppler is listed with a death date of July 29, 1955, while a death notice was published in the *San Francisco Examiner* for August 1, 1955, that begins "In this city, July 30, 1955, Joseph R. Eppler." It goes on to list his surviving relatives, notes that he was "a member of the Olympic Club and the South End Rowing Club," and ends with the announcement of "a private Requiem High Mass . . . at the

Star of the Sea Church, Monday, August 1, 1955. Interment, Holy Cross Cemetery."

But what was it that drew Kees, Eppler, and so many others over the years to the Golden Gate Bridge? Earlier I mentioned that approximately one percent of those who'd leapt from the bridge survived (Rosen 289). Of those who didn't, the great majority died, not from drowning, but "as a result of impact trauma" (Rosen 292), because "the velocity of a free-fall" from the bridge ranges "between 73.6 and 75 miles per hour of impact force" (Rosen 290). Dr. David H. Rosen, who interviewed survivors of leaps from the bridge and published his findings in an article titled "Suicide Survivors" in the April 1975 issue of *The Western Journal of Medicine*, notes that "all six of the interviewed Golden Gate survivors' suicide plans involved *only* the Golden Gate Bridge. Four of the six said they would not have used any other method of suicide" if the bridge "had not been available" (Rosen 290). One survivor said he "was attracted to the bridge" because "there is a kind of form to it, a certain grace and beauty" expressive of "an affinity" between himself, "the Golden Gate Bridge and death." Another survivor "associated jumping from the Golden Gate Bridge with entering the 'golden doors' in order to leave his body and the material realm and enter into the new spiritual realm." A third described it as "a romantic thing to do" that assured "certain death in a painless way." Yet another "said the extensive press coverage and the 'notorious fame' that surround the Golden Gate Bridge suicides, plus its 'easy accessibility,' made it the 'only method' of suicide for him" (Rosen 290). The reasons given for attempting suicide among those Rosen interviewed were, variously, extreme depression, "feelings of alienation and hopelessness," personal rejection, and loneliness (Rosen 290) (when the police entered Kees's apartment the only living thing there was Kees's cat, named Lonesome). We know the poet's friends reported he had been depressed before his disappearance, and Kees, like many creative people, had likely suffered off and on from depression most of his life. The bridge's beauty and its name, evoking the gateway to a new golden realm, may have been factors drawing him to the bridge, but certainly the press cov-

erage and "the 'notorious fame' " that attached to "Golden Gate Bridge suicides" would have recalled the way the author of *The Bridge*'s suicide from the stern of the SS *Orizaba* focused attention on (and still attracts interest in) Crane's life and works. Moreover, just as the December 1931 suicide of the popular American poet Vachel Lindsay, who was plagued with financial difficulties and suffering from depression, more than likely influenced Crane's April 1932 decision to end his own life as he headed back to the United States during the worst year of the Great Depression, so Crane's suicide (and the image of the Brooklyn Bridge connected with his fame) likely influenced Kees's choice of another famous bridge as the site of his own death. And I'd suggest that Crane's and Kees's suicides affected in turn John Berryman's choice in January 1972 to end his own life (one in which he had battled depression for many years) by jumping off the Washington Avenue Bridge in Minneapolis onto the west bank of the Mississippi River.

Chapter Two

An Almost Invisible Note

Earlier I mentioned that the two books the police found near Kees's bed when they entered his apartment—Dostoyevsky's *The Devils* and Unamuno's *Tragic Sense of Life*—were perhaps purposely left there by Kees in lieu of a suicide note. If so, what message would they have been intended to convey? In Dostoyevsky's novel, two of the main characters kill themselves—the nihilist Alexei Kirillov and the willful, psychologically unstable Nikolai Stavrogin—while there are suicides of at least two other minor characters. One of the first things we're told about Kirillov is that he "is writing a very interesting article dealing with the causes of the increase of suicide in Russia, and, generally speaking, the causes that lead to the increase or decrease of suicide in society" (Dostoyevsky 93). (One recalls in this connection Kees's planned book on famous suicides, for which he had already written profiles of Hart Crane, the actress Lupe Velez, and the anarchist Alexander Berkman.) In a conversation with the narrator, Kirillov explains the reasons he intends to kill himself, reasons that seem like a combination of Nietzsche's philosophical evolutionism

(that predicts the inevitable coming of the Overman in *Zarathustra*) and of French existentialism's ultimate test of free will:

> "Now man is not yet what he will be. There will be a new man, happy and proud. For whom it will be the same to live or not to live, he will be the new man. He who will conquer pain and terror will himself be a god. And this God will not be."
>
> "Then this God does exist according to you?"
>
> "He does not exist, but He is. In the stone there is no pain, but in the fear of the stone is the pain. God is the pain of the fear of death. He who will conquer pain and terror will become himself a god. Then there will be a new life, a new man; everything will be new…then they will divide history into two parts: from the gorilla to the annihilation of God, and from the annihilation of God…"
>
> "To the gorilla?"
>
> "…To the transformation of the earth, and of man physically."
>
> (Dostoyevsky 114)

Kirillov concludes, "Every one who wants the supreme freedom must dare to kill himself…There is no freedom beyond; that is all, and there is nothing beyond. He who dares kill himself is God. Now every one can do so that there shall be no God and shall be nothing" (Dostoyevsky 115). One thinks of the existentialist dictum that the true test of the individual will's freedom is the performance of that final, supreme act against one's own self-interest—suicide. Or as Kirillov phrases it, "I am bound to shoot myself because the highest point of my own self-will is to kill myself with my own hands" (Dostoyevsky 628)—and he ultimately does.

But where Kirillov's determination to kill himself is programmatic, in his case the final accomplishment of a long-standing philosophical position, the willful, aristocratic Stavrogin's decision is more the result of boredom and perversity, more the giving way to a sudden impulse. He tells Kirillov,

> I understand shooting oneself, of course…I sometimes have thought of it myself, and then there always came a new idea: if one did something wicked,

> or, worse still, something shameful, that is disgraceful, only very shameful and . . . ridiculous, such as people would remember for a thousand years and hold in scorn for a thousand years, and suddenly the thought comes: "one blow in the temple and there would be nothing more."
>
> One wouldn't care then for men and that they would hold one in scorn for a thousand years, would one? (Dostoyevsky 338)

In a chapter that Dostoyevsky had written to illuminate Stavrogin's psychological makeup (a chapter Dostoyevsky suppressed before the novel was published but that now is included as an appendix to every edition of the work), Stavrogin goes to Bishop Tihon and makes a reluctant, oblique confession of the perversity that animates many of his "wicked . . . , shameful . . . , disgraceful" actions. Foremost of these is his rape of a twelve-year-old girl and his standing by as the girl, deranged by the trauma, takes her own life. Stavrogin says that at the time he was leading a life of debauchery in company with "a whole crew of 'pals' ": "I believe we did many vile things . . . I repeat at that time I was not at all averse to being deported to Siberia. I was so utterly bored that I could have hanged myself" (Dostoyevsky 704). Later Stavrogin, admitting that "it has always bored me to recall the past" (Dostoyevsky 714), is told by Tihon that "there is one punishment that falls upon those who divorce themselves from their native soil: boredom and a tendency toward idleness even where there is a desire for work" (Dostoyevsky 722). The tedium of the everyday, the soul-killing predictably of repetition, a level of boredom so extreme that the self chooses the void as purpose rather than be devoid of purpose—all these existentialist motifs are personified in Stavrogin. On the one hand, one suspects Dostoyevsky had read Poe's little tale "The Imp of the Perverse," while on the other, one knows that Camus had read *The Devils* because he cites Kirillov's decision to kill himself in his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus," whose opening sentence reads "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide" (Camus 3). Camus includes Kirillov in a small group of "thinkers who refused a meaning to life" and then "admitted . . . [this] logic to the point of refusing that life" (Camus 7).

One of the themes of *The Devils* is an ongoing contrast between those who believe in nothing and those who still believe in God. That theme clearly connects Dostoyevsky's novel to Unamuno's book-length essay *The Tragic Sense of Life*. Unamuno argues that there is a basic contradiction in man's nature between the head and the heart, between reason and desire, and that while reason knows each of us must die, the heart's deepest, strongest desire is to live forever. It is the human desire for immortality that gives a meaning to God, creates the notion of a Being who, because He is eternal, can grant the gift of immortality to man. Unamuno evokes the opposition between nihilism and theism, between belief in nothing and belief in God, in the book's opening chapter:

> I do not wish to die utterly, and I wish to know whether I am to die or not definitely. If I do not die, what is my destiny? and if I die, then nothing has any meaning for me. And there are three solutions: (a) I know that I shall die utterly, and then irremediable despair, or (b) I know that I shall not die utterly, and then resignation, or (c) I cannot know either one or the other, and then resignation in despair or despair in resignation, a desperate resignation or a resigned despair, and hence conflict. (Unamuno 33)

Unamuno's strategy throughout the book confronts modern man with this dilemma: either belief in God or despair—and for "despair" read "suicide." A gathering of quotations from various parts of the book make clear the meaning of this latter alternative:

> The greater part of those who seek death at their own hand are moved thereto by love; it is the supreme longing for life, for more life, the longing to prolong and perpetuate life, that urges them to death, once they are persuaded of the vanity of this longing. (Unamuno 44–45)
>
> * * *
>
> The vital consequence of rationalism would be suicide. Kierkegaard puts it very well: "The consequence for existence of pure thought is suicide…" (Unamuno 115)

(Unamuno explains Kierkegaard's word "existence" as meaning "the existential or practical, not the rational or logical, consequence.")

* * *

> Was it not a kind of doom that the ancient gods, no less than the demons, were subject to—the deprivation of the power to commit suicide? (Unamuno 224)

* * *

> The majority of suicides would not take their lives if they had the assurance that they would never die on this earth. The self-slayer kills himself because he will not wait for death. (Unamuno 233)

* * *

> The very same reason which one man may regard as a motive for taking care to prolong his life may be regarded by another man as a motive for shooting himself. (Unamuno 261)

And these are by no means all of the references to suicide in the book.

Given that Unamuno believes there is a basic contradiction in human nature between reason and heart's desire, a reader of *The Tragic Sense of Life* should not be surprised at the often contradictory movement of Unamuno's thought. It is almost as if the author had taken as the book's secret epigraph Whitman's statement in "Song of Myself": "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself." For Unamuno would claim that the very notion of logical contradiction gives undue authority to rationalism in our lives, that rationalism, exercised on the concept of God by Platonizing theologians or Aristotelian philosophers over the centuries, has reduced the deity to an abstraction, a God-idea, that no longer commands the belief of modern rational man. This God-idea is simply a congeries of abstract absolutes: infinite, eternal, omniscient, ubiquitous, omnipotent, and so on. What Unamuno says must be recovered is the feeling of a *personal* God, the God-man, a Being with an "existential or practical, not" a "rational or logical, consequence." And to do this, modern man must grant the heart's desire and the irrational

or anti-rational its proper share of authority in his life. He asks, "What is our heart's truth, anti-rational though it be? The immortality of the human soul, the truth of the persistence of our consciousness without any termination whatsoever, the truth of the human finality of the Universe" (Unamuno 263).

Recall that in the case of Stavrogin, Dostoyevsky identifies existential boredom as the motor of the perverse actions that eventually lead him to hang himself. Unamuno also focuses on this motive for despair and a consequent suicide:

> If you look at the universe as closely and as inwardly as you are able to look—that is to say, if you look within yourself; if you not only contemplate but feel things in your own consciousness, upon which all things have traced their painful impression—you will arrive at the abyss of the tedium, not merely of life, but of something more: at the tedium of existence, at the bottomless pit of the vanity of vanities. And thus you will come to pity all things; you will arrive at universal love. (Unamuno 138)

But as he says later in the book, "Love, in a word, is resigned despair" (Unamuno 206).

And Unamuno even extends the human aversion for tedium to a certain conception of the afterlife:

> A beatific vision, a loving contemplation in which the soul is absorbed in God and, as it were, lost in Him, appears either as an annihilation of self or as a prolonged tedium to our natural way of feeling. And hence a certain feeling which we not infrequently observe and which has more than once expressed itself in satires, . . . with reference to the heaven of eternal glory as a place of eternal boredom. And it is useless to despise feelings such as these, so wholly natural and spontaneous. (Unamuno 229)

One thinks of stanza 6 of Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning" and its evocation of the "eternal boredom" of paradise as a way of calling into question the very existence of an afterlife:

Is there no change of death in paradise?
Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs
Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,
Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,
With rivers like our own that seek for seas
They never find, the same receding shores
That never touch with inarticulate pang?
Why set the pear upon those river-banks
Or spice the shores with odors of the plum?
Alas, that they should wear our colors there,
The silken weavings of our afternoons,
And pick the strings of our insipid lutes!
Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
Within whose burning bosom we devise
Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly. (Stevens 69)

But Unamuno presents his own passionate, anthropocentric image of an ever-changing afterlife to counter the apparent boredom of heaven:

> And the soul, my soul at least, longs for something else, not absorption, not quietude, not peace, not appeasement, it longs ever to approach and never to arrive, it longs for a never-ending longing, for an eternal hope which is eternally renewed but never wholly fulfilled. And together with all this, it longs for an eternal lack of something and an eternal suffering. Do not write upon the gate of heaven that sentence which Dante placed over the threshold of hell, Lasciate ogni speranza! Do not destroy time! Our life is a hope which is continually converting itself into memory and memory in its turn begets hope. Give us leave to live! The eternity that is like an eternal present, without memory and without hope, is death. Thus do ideas exist, but not thus do men live. Thus do ideas exist in the God-idea, but not thus can men live in the living God, in the God-man. (Unamuno 256)

Yet Unamuno concedes that we cannot know definitely whether or not death is an annihilation, and so the scholar-critic of Cervantes exhorts,

"If it is nothing that awaits us, let us make an injustice of it; let us fight against destiny, even though without hope of victory; let us fight against it quixotically" (Unamuno 268). But having made that concession, he slips almost seamlessly into the standard back-up position of subjective immortality, the individual's hope of living on in the memory of mankind: "And not only do we fight against destiny in longing for what is irrational" but "our greatest endeavour must be to make ourselves irreplaceable; to make the theoretical fact—if this expression does not involve a contradiction in terms—the fact that each one of us is unique and irreplaceable, that no one else can fill the gap that will be left when we die, a practical truth" (Unamuno 268–69).

In leaving these works by Dostoyevsky and Unamuno by his bed to be discovered by the police when they entered his apartment, Kees framed the debate about what Camus calls "the only truly serious philosophical problem." And appropriately for a suicide staged as a mysterious vanishing, this almost invisible suicide note that Kees left was meant to be read only by an act of intertextual interpretation, the type of reading required for evaluating a poet's *corpus*, the written body that remains when his physical body has vanished. Kees in effect placed the question of suicide between two poles: on the one hand, Unamuno's attempt to recover for modern man the reality of a personal God, what he calls the "God-man," and on the other, Kirillov's attempt to begin the creation of a future man-god. And in each effort suicide has a role to play. In the former case, Unamuno says that if modern man doesn't recover the sense of a personal God, then this world and human life will be without meaning or value. In such a situation suicide becomes not only a logical, but an almost inevitable, response. In the latter case Kirillov sees suicide as the means to free man from the fear of death, to free him from living under the thrall of some exterior power (i.e., God) that can smite him at will, suicide being in effect the ultimate demonstration of both the human will's freedom and its assumption of supreme (i.e., deific) power.

At this point I would add two other texts as glosses on the message that Kees likely wished to convey through the Dostoyevsky and Unamuno vol-

umes left in his apartment. The first is *Nonverbal Communication: Notes on the Visual Perception of Human Relations*, which Kees coauthored with Jurgen Ruesch. A psychiatrist, Ruesch worked at the Langley Porter Clinic of the University of California at San Francisco, where Kees was also employed. Kees worked for Ruesch on his project studying nonverbal communication in 1953 and 1954. Their book was published by the University of California Press in 1956, the year after Kees's presumed death. On the opening page of the first chapter, the text discusses "the specialists in mass communication," specifically "advertisers" and other "popularizers" ("radio, television . . . and the big circulation magazines") who seek

> to shape a world in which the principle of least effort is supposed to pay off: a world in which everyone will smile without letup and where every problem has a solution, where every ache and worry—*even loneliness and despair*—can be speedily and painlessly dispelled. The advertisers project the idea that despair may be hidden and loneliness may wear a mask; actually, a contorted smile may be more alarming than a sober expression of preoccupation, and an assumed gaiety more distressing than an honest statement of disappointment. (Ruesch and Keys 3, italics mine)

(Recall that Kees himself had worked for a "big circulation magazine" [*Time*] in the 1940s.)

As an evocation of Kees's state of mind, one of the most revealing of the visual displays in the book contains six photographs with the overall title "Symbols of Belief." The left hand column shows three photographs each bearing an individual caption: the label on the topmost photo reads "Nihilism," the one below that "Existentialism," and the bottom one reads "Theism."

"Nihilism" is illustrated by a photograph of an Air Force recruitment poster showing a smiling aviator wearing a 1950s jet pilot helmet with attached oxygen mask and bearing beneath it the slogan "Be an Aviation Cadet." The poster has had a horizontal strip ripped off that runs downward across the pilot's face, and one is left to wonder whether it is this

defacement or the poster's message (with its evocation of the Cold War and the ever-present fear of nuclear disaster) that is meant to illustrate nihilism. "Existentialism" shows the front door of a dilapidated stucco house. The paint is worn off the door, and the stucco surface on either side has gaping holes that reveal the lathing beneath. On the door is a cardboard sign that reads "No Loitering"—which is perhaps as close as Kees could come in photographing in the Bay area to finding something that would recall Sartre's *No Exit*. (Indeed, one is reminded of Kees's poem "Xantha Street": "Nailed up in a box / Nailed up in a pen, nailed up in a room / That once enclosed you amiably, you write / 'Finished. No more. The end,' signing your name." The poem concludes, "Cold in the heart and colder in the brain, / We blink in darkened rooms toward exits that are gone" [Kees, *Poems* 76].)

The bottom photo, "Theism," shows the window display in a Christian Science reading room. There are open books in the window and what appears to be a photograph of Mary Baker Eddy, as well as a small sign that says "Free Christian Science Lecture." But this initial column on the page marked "Symbols of Belief" makes clear the ranking of Nihilism at the top and Theism at the bottom. And indeed we can see that in leaving the books by Dostoyevsky and Unamuno in place of a suicide note, Kees was himself engaging in a form of symbolic, if not wholly nonverbal, communication.

Perhaps the uncanniest moment in *Nonverbal Communication* is the inclusion in the text of a two-page story from the *San Francisco Chronicle* dated October 13, 1953. It concerns "a 56-year-old Berkeley banker" named Harvey L. Morton who suddenly vanished on the afternoon of February 26, 1952:

> His disappearance was reported March 3 and an all-points bulletin was issued from Sacramento immediately. It carried his full description and a record of the banker's fingerprints.
>
> No trace could be found of the missing man. But San Francisco records show that on Feb. 27, 1952, at 7:40 P.M. a man, who signed the register as

"James Foster," was found in a comatose condition in a dressing room at the Palace Baths at 85 Third Street.

He was taken by ambulance to San Francisco Hospital, where his medical record shows that he was unable to speak; that there were no identifying papers or valuables in his possession and that doctors and nurses questioned his identification. (Ruesch and Keys 176–77)

Probably because of the time lapse between Morton's disappearance and the report of his being missing, the police never associated him with James Foster, and so for the next twenty months Morton remained "first as a patient at San Francisco Hospital, then at Laguna Honda Hospital" (Ruesch and Keys 177). Then

Memory returned to the banker in a flash on Sunday afternoon [October 12, 1953]. Still scarcely able to speak, he walked out of his ward and downstairs. Without notifying nurses or stewards, he called a cab and went home to Berkeley....

Mrs. Morton said she was working in the garden when some children came out to tell her a man was in the living room, waiting to see her. She went in and found her husband, whom she had almost given up for dead.

Mrs. Morton said her husband remembers only that he suffered a stroke "near a San Francisco railroad station" and that he was taken by ambulance to some hospital. (Ruesch and Keys 178)

In a book that contains almost no case histories, this one stands out not only for its length and its strangeness but also because Kees would have seen in it the disappearance of a man who is "almost given up for dead" and yet who survives and returns, which is to say, seen a real instance of that alternative he suggested to friends when he said he was going to Mexico to stay, seen a disappearance that was not the death of the body but a temporary death of the self through loss of memory.

The other text that sheds light on the two books Kees left in lieu of a suicide note is referred to by Kees in a May 1951 letter to his friend, the novelist Anton Myrer. Disparaging F. Scott Fitzgerald's "more thick-

headed detractors," Kees said, "I have always been enormously moved by the last pages of *Tender* in their compression and as a triumph of dealing with years that are too sad to insist upon. The boys who see this book as a 'parable of the artist being destroyed' by the haute bourgeoisie leave me limp. It is queer how people without the remotest understanding of the tragic sense of life react to a book that is soaked in it" (Kees, *Letters* 153). In citing the "last pages" of Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*, Kees focuses on one of the great endings in modern fiction, as the book's hero Dick Diver goes into decline. Dick, having left his wife Nicole and their high society life on the French Riviera, returns—psychologically drained, disillusioned, and suffering from alcoholism—to practice medicine in upstate New York. Settling first in Buffalo, Dick soon moves to Batavia, New York, and switches from being a psychiatrist to practicing "general medicine." He then moves to Lockport, "but he became entangled with a girl who worked in a grocery store, and he was also involved in a lawsuit about some medical question; so he left Lockport." And in the book's final paragraph:

> After that he didn't ask for the children to be sent to America and didn't answer when Nicole wrote asking him if he needed money. In the last letter she had from him he told her that he was practising [sic] in Geneva, New York, and she got the impression that he had settled down with some one to keep house for him. She looked up Geneva in an atlas and found it was in the heart of the Finger Lakes Section and considered a pleasant place. Perhaps, so she liked to think, his career was biding its time, again like Grant's in Galena; his latest note was post-marked from Hornell, New York, which is some distance from Geneva and a very small town; in any case he is almost certainly in that section of the country, in one town or another. (Fitzgerald 314–15)

The young Dr. Diver of the novel's start—handsome, thoughtful, charming, and with a virtually unlimited future as a brilliant young psychiatrist—moves through the book almost inexorably toward this final descent into a life of tawdry ordinariness and small town tedium. And these last years after Dick's return to America, "years . . . too sad to insist upon," as

Kees says, are evoked in less than a page of the novel—truly "a triumph" of "compression." But what is most striking for our purposes is that as Dick declines, moving through a succession of ever smaller towns, he seems to vanish into the landscape until both narrator and reader lose sight of him. The most that can be affirmed of his existence is that he's "almost certainly in that section of the country, in one town or another," a situation in which we would be left to wonder whether Dick is still alive—and how would we know? And this is the ending of a book that Kees thought was "soaked" in "the tragic sense of life"—a phrase Unamuno said evoked the basic contradiction in human nature between the head and the heart. In the 1950s when Kees was trying to get his third poetry volume (titled at that point *A Breaking and a Death*) published, he contacted his former literary agent, Henry Volkening, to deal with Harcourt Brace, where the manuscript had languished with no response from the publisher. It was ultimately turned down, and Volkening submitted it to Knopf. "In the meantime," as Reidel notes, "Kees refused to let himself 'go under' with rage and despair at going unpublished for so long. He had no time to indulge in the 'congenital Abe Northism of most poets' " (Reidel 247). The reference is, of course, to Fitzgerald's character Abe North, Dick Diver's close friend in *Tender Is the Night*. North, a composer of modern music whose first works had met with great success, has not been able, by the time of the novel's start in 1925, to fulfill that early promise. Plagued by alcoholism and self-loathing at his failure, North engages in increasingly self-destructive behavior until he finally gets himself killed. One of the emotional blows that causes Dick Diver's morale to crack, precisely because it seems to foreshadow his own decline, is the news that his once-brilliant friend Abe has been beaten to death in a New York speakeasy.

Chapter Three

The Excellence of Weldon Kees

I have spent time here at the start musing over the details and the meaning of Kees's apparent suicide because if, as I've suggested, Kees likely staged his death as his final aesthetic act, then that act provides a lens through which to detect and interpret the structures, motifs, and images that accumulate with an obsessive force in his poems. And certainly obsessive compulsion is the right notion here, for as Kees's poetry progressed over the years the depressing sense of meaningless repetition, of a quotidian predictability and soul-killing boredom, seemed more and more to be either his poems' explicit subject or their pervasive background. One thinks of his poem "Round," first published in the magazine *Furioso* in October 1949. The title plays on the notion of a musical round, a type of composition, according to Roger Kamien's *Music: An Appreciation*, "in which two or more voices sing exactly the same melody (and may continue repeating it indefinitely), but with each voice beginning at different times so that different parts of the melody coincide in the different voices, but nevertheless fit harmoniously together." Most of the voices in Kees's "Round" are associated with historical figures—the seventeenth-centu-

ry English poet Andrew Marvell; Ernest Renan, a nineteenth-century French scholar of ancient Middle Eastern languages (best remembered today for his 1863 work *The Life of Jesus*); the nineteenth-century French painter Paul Cézanne; and the twentieth-century American art critic Royal Cortissoz, who wrote for the *New York Herald-Tribune*. But there is also one other voice: that of the poem's speaker, an ironic voice that repeats the individual phrases associated with each of the other voices, repeats them as if caught in a repetitive cycle from which he is unable to free himself. The poem begins

> "Wondrous life!" cried Marvell at Appleton House.
> Renan admired Jesus Christ "wholeheartedly."
> But here dried ferns keep falling to the floor,
> And something inside my head
> Flaps like a worn-out blind. Royal Cortissoz is dead.
> A blow to the *Herald-Tribune*. A closet mouse
> Rattles the wrapper on the breakfast food. Renan
> Admired Jesus Christ "wholeheartedly."
>
> Flaps like a worn-out blind. Cézanne
> Would break out in the quiet streets of Aix
> And shout, "Le monde, c'est terrible!" Royal
> Cortissoz is dead. And something inside my head
> Flaps like a worn-out blind. (Kees, *Collected* 100)

So in addition to the speaker's voice, we have those of a poet/statesman, a linguist/philosopher/biographer, a painter, and an art critic, and each evokes a certain stance toward life and the world—a spectrum of responses that the ironic voice repeats, alternating with its own sense of drab ordinariness, like a window shade flapping around its spindle when its spring gives way.

The Marvell quote is from "The Garden," his poem celebrating the restorative powers (physical, mental, and spiritual) of nature and the garden's solitude as a retreat from the busyness of worldly ambitions:

What wond'rous Life in this I lead!
Ripe Apples drop about my head;
The Luscious Clusters of the Vine
Upon my Mouth do crush their Wine…

Meanwhile the Mind, from pleasure less,
Withdraws into its happiness…
Annihilating all that's made
To a green Thought in a green Shade. (Marvell 52)

Kees identifies the garden in the poem as that at Nun Appleton Hall, where Marvell had served in the early 1650s as tutor to the daughter of Thomas Fairfax and about which Marvell had written a poem of some 776 lines entitled "Upon Appleton House, to my Lord Fairfax."

Where the quotation marks in the first line of Kees's "Round" set off a real phrase from Marvell's poem, those around the word "wholeheartedly" in the second line don't enclose a word that actually occurs in the English translation of Renan's *Vie de Jésus*, but rather, suggest the ironic tone in which the word is used. In his *Life of Jesus*, Renan set out to write the biography of a great man but someone who was definitely not the Deity: as he says, "That Jesus had never thought of passing for an incarnation of God, we cannot doubt" (Renan 220). Renan notes that the title "son of God" was an epithet in Jesus's day traditionally applied by the Jews to anyone who set himself up as a prophet. Using the Gospels and other ancient documents, Renan attempts to rationalize the four evangelists' accounts of Jesus's life and present what he takes to be the real events in the career of an historical person. What gives Renan the most difficulty in this project is Jesus's miracles. Here, for example, is his rational explanation of the raising from the dead of Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary:

It seems that Lazarus was sick, and that it was indeed in consequence of a message from his alarmed sisters [that Jesus came to Bethany]…The joy of his coming might recall Lazarus to life…Perhaps Lazarus, still pale from his

> sickness, caused himself to be swathed in grave clothes, as one dead, and shut up in his family tomb . . . The emotion which Jesus experienced at the tomb of his friend, whom he thought dead, may have been mistaken by the witnesses for that groaning, that trembling which accompanies miracles; popular opinion holding that the divine virtue is in man an element, as it were, epileptic and convulsive. Jesus (still following the hypothesis above enunciated) desired to see once more him whom he had loved, and, the stone having been removed, Lazarus came forth with his grave clothes and his head bound about with a napkin. This apparition must naturally have been regarded by all as a resurrection. Faith knows no other law than what it believes to be the truth. (Renan 305)

And Jesus's own resurrection gets even shorter shrift in Renan's account:

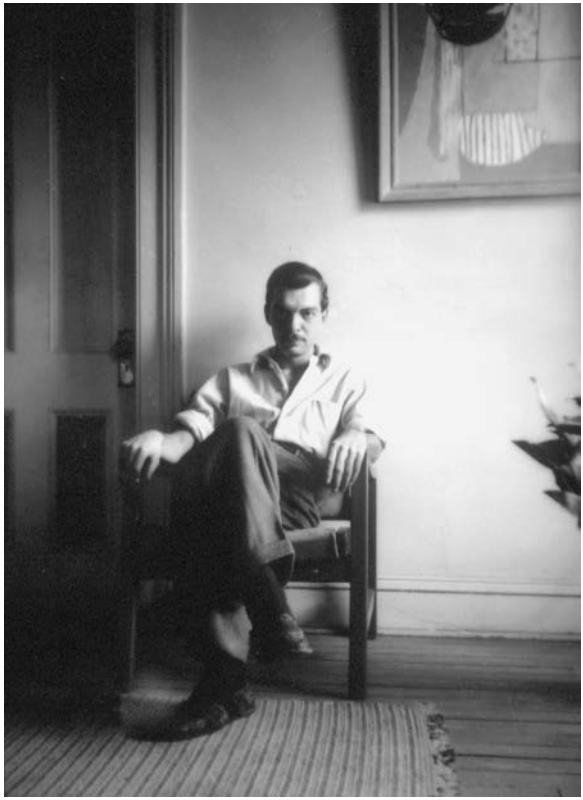
> so deep was the trace which he [Jesus] had left in the hearts of his disciples and of a few devoted women, that, for weeks to come, he was to them living and consoling. Had his body been taken away, or did enthusiasm, always credulous, afterwards generate the mass of accounts by which faith in the resurrection was sought to be established? This, for want of peremptory evidence, we shall never know. We may say, however, that the strong imagination of Mary Magdalene here enacted a principal part. Divine power of love! sacred moments in which the passion of a hallucinated woman gives the world a resurrected God! (Renan 357)

However, what becomes clear from the almost 400 pages of his *Vie de Jésus* is that, as Kees says, Renan, indeed, "admired Jesus Christ 'wholeheartedly,' " but with one caveat: "Let us then place the person of Jesus on the highest summit of human grandeur. Let us not permit ourselves to be led astray by exaggerated distrust in regard to a legend which continually draws us into the supernatural world"—that is, the accounts of his miracles (Renan 368). And he concludes, "all ages will proclaim that among the sons of men there is none born greater than Jesus" (Renan 376). But in comparison to the central claim of Christianity—that Jesus is the son of God, the second person of the Trinity, who by his death and resurrection

defeated death and gave man the gift of immortality—Renan's unstinting approbation of Jesus as the greatest man who ever lived, a religious innovator whose teachings changed the world, becomes a thing so paltry, so trivial as to make Renan's admiration ultimately seem silly and thus deserving of all the irony that Kees packs into the word "wholeheartedly."

This ironic tone extends as well to the figure of Royal Cortissoz, the art critic for the *New York Herald-Tribune* from 1891 to his death in 1948, who had opposed and criticized every major movement in modern painting from Cubism on through abstract expressionism. In early 1944 Kees had begun to do abstract paintings. As Reidel remarks, he soon "found himself at the beginning of the New York school before the art historian Dore Ashton gave it that name. Through [Harold] Rosenberg, [Clement] Greenberg, and Manny Farber, and on his own, he learned what was going on in the studios of Jackson Pollack, Robert Motherwell, William Baziotes, and the others. He knew they were becoming the center of an exciting controversy that had not yet come to a head . . ." (Reidel 138).

Over the next ten years Kees continued to produce paintings and collages. He had one-man shows at the Peridot Gallery in New York and the Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco. His work was included in the Whitney Bienniel exhibition of American art. He also would have appeared in the January 1951 issue as one of the artists in *Life* magazine's famous photo of fifteen abstract painters, dubbed the Irascibles, who had protested the Metropolitan Museum's selection policy for an exhibit titled "American Art Today—1950" (the group went on to boycott the exhibit). Among the artists included in the photo were Jimmy Ernst, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, William Baziotes, Jackson Pollack, Clyfford Still, Robert Motherwell, and Willem de Kooning, but Kees had already left for California before the photo was taken. In addition to his own painting, Kees also wrote art criticism for *The Nation*, replacing Clement Greenberg in that role. In defending and explaining modern abstract art, Kees found himself in direct opposition to Royal Cortissoz, "who had long been a bulwark against modern art at the Metropolitan Museum" (Reidel 209). So when the speaker in "Round" says that "Royal



Weldon Kees sitting under one of his paintings in Berkeley, early 1953. Courtesy of the Gertrude Stein Gallery.

Cortissoz is dead," he doesn't go on to say that it's a loss to art or the art world; rather, he makes the deflating comment that it's a loss to Cortissoz's newspaper—"A blow to the *Herald-Tribune*," the same paper that had published a column defending the Metropolitan Museum in the controversy with the Irascibles.

From the art critic Royal Cortissoz to the post-Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne seems an easy enough associative step. Kees found the details for his line "Cézanne / Would break out in the quiet streets of Aix / And shout, 'Le monde, c'est terrible!' " in a July 12, 1915 letter from Rainer Maria Rilke to Frau Helene von Nostitz. The letter in question is

contained in *Wartime Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke*, which was published by W. W. Norton in 1940, just after the start of the Second World War. Lamenting the change that had come over the world with the start of World War I, Rilke says he does not know what to write "when everything one touches is unspeakable, unrecognizable, when nothing belongs to one, no feeling, no hope" (Rilke 33). He continues, "The longer it lasts—the disturbing thing is not the fact of this war, but that it is being used and exploited in a business-ridden, a nothing but human world, that the god himself, once someone had flung it into that world, cannot call it back" (Rilke 34). Rilke speaks of "a few warning figures, a few zealous individuals who clung to their own hearts, which stood against the stream," and he invokes "Cézanne, the old man" who "when one told him of what was going on . . . could break out in the quiet streets of Aix and shriek at his companion: 'Le monde, c'est terrible . . .' As of a prophet one thinks of him, and longs for one who will cry and howl like that—but they all went away beforehand, those old men who would have had the power to weep now before the peoples" (Rilke 34–35). One can imagine what this passage would have meant to Kees at the start of a Second World War within twenty years after the end of the First.

So we have the four voices of the round plus the fifth voice of the speaker, and among them they evoke a series of linked oppositions governing life and the world that constantly repeat themselves and from which the speaker feels unable to free himself. These range from the dream of the wonderousness of life for the seventeenth-century poet to the terribleness of the world for the nineteenth-century painter, from the lusciousness of Marvell's garden world to the dying fern in the speaker's room, from Renan's sense that Jesus is a great man but not a god whose death gave man personal immortality to Royal Cortissoz's death which is a loss to no one but his employer. And this sense of endless repetition as constant decline, of the spiritual aridity of a dying world, achieves its culminating evocation in the image of that dead world that continually circles our own:

The soil
In which the ferns are dying needs more Vigoro.
There is no twilight on the moon, no mist or rain,
No hail or snow, no life. Here in this house

Dried ferns keep falling to the floor, a mouse
Rattles the wrapper on the breakfast food.

In the poem's penultimate line the speaker's weary voice records his powerlessness to stem this continual decline: "One notes fresh desecrations of the portico" (Kees, *Collected* 100).

Just as Kees's subject in this 1949 poem is the meaninglessness of repetition in a world devoid of transcendence, a world without that ultimate goal which Tennyson evoked in *In Memoriam* as the "one far-off divine event, to which the whole creation moves," so too it was Camus's subject in his 1942 essay "The Myth of Sisyphus." The story of Sisyphus—whose punishment, ordained by the gods, is to roll a heavy stone up a mountain only to have it roll back down again as soon as it reaches the top, so that his task must be endlessly repeated—illustrates, according to Camus, that the gods "had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor" (Camus 119). And because Camus felt that Sisyphus personified the fate of every human being, he began his essay with the claim that there was only "one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide" (Camus 3). Of Sisyphus's story Camus remarks:

> If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and his fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious. Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn. (Camus 121)

Earlier in his essay Camus had invoked Dostoyevsky's character Kirilov from *The Devils* as part of an argument showing that Jesus was, in effect, a Sisyphean hero of the absurd *avant la lettre*:

> Kirilov in fact fancies for a moment that Jesus at his death *did not find himself in Paradise*. He found out then that his torture had been useless. "The laws of nature," says the engineer, "made Christ live in the midst of falsehood and die for a falsehood." Solely in this sense Jesus indeed personifies the whole human drama. He is the most complete man, being the one who realized the most absurd condition. He is not the God-man but the man-god. And, like him, each of us can be crucified and victimized—and is to a certain degree. (Camus 107)

Camus describes Kirilov's taking his own life as "a pedagogical suicide" showing his brother humans "a royal and difficult path on which he will be the first": "Kirilov sacrifices himself, then. But if he is crucified, he will not be victimized. He remains the man-god. Convinced of a death without future, imbued with evangelical melancholy. 'I,' he says, 'am unhappy because I am *obliged* to assert my freedom' . . . Before terminating in blood an indescribable spiritual adventure, Kirilov makes a remark as old as human suffering: 'All is well' " (Camus 108–9).

Locating the same remark in one of the final speeches of the blinded Oedipus in Sophocles's play, Camus remarks, "Sophocles' Oedipus, like Dostoyevsky's Kirilov, thus give the recipe for the absurd victory. Ancient wisdom confirms modern heroism" (Camus 122). And Camus concludes his essay, "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus 123). In some sense Camus's notion of a happy Sisyphus is a twentieth-century, existentialist version of Nietzsche's nineteenth-century project of restoring, to a contemporary world in which God is dead, the "joyful nihilism" underlying classical Greek tragedy, a project Nietzsche began with *The Birth of Tragedy*. But clearly, the speaker in Kees's "Round" sounds neither joyful nor heroic. One can well imagine him characterizing Camus's

victory of the absurd hero as simply whistling in the dark—if he were not inclined to characterize it more sympathetically as representing Emerson's project of turning "a fate into a power," of reinterpreting *ananke* (the necessity of each individual's death) from something destined that overrules the individual will into something the will either concurs in or actively brings about.

Earlier I discussed Renan's work at some length for two reasons. First, because, as we shall see presently, his book on Jesus is invoked in both Dostoyevsky's *The Devils* and Unamuno's *Tragic Sense of Life*. And second, because Kees, no doubt influenced by Renan's tortuous debunking of Jesus's miracles, wrote a 65-line poem, "A Distance from the Sea" (published in his volume *Poems, 1947–1954*), in which the speaker, one of Jesus's disciples, explains how his "miracles" were manufactured:

> That raft we rigged up, under the water
> Was just the item: when he walked,
> With his robes blowing, dark against the sky,
> It was as though the unsubstantial waves held up
> His slender and inviolate feet.

The disciple then goes on to describe the effect on the unwitting observers:

> There on the shore
> The crowd's response was instantaneous. He
> Handled it well, I thought—the gait, the tilt of the head, just right.
> Long streaks of light were blinding on the waves.
> And then we knew our work well worth the time:
> The days of sawing, fitting, all those nails,
> The tiresome rehearsals, considerations of execution.
> But if you want a miracle, you have to work for it,
> Lay your plans carefully, and keep one jump
> Ahead of the crowd. To report a miracle
> Is a pleasure unalloyed… (Kees, *Poems* 137)

The disciple, remembering these events many years later, doesn't know quite what to make of them:

> I think now of the raft
> (For me, somehow, the summit of the whole experience)
> And all the expectations of that day, but also of the cave
> We stocked with bread, the secret meetings
> In the hills, the fake assassins hired for the last pursuit…
> Who managed all that blood I never knew. (Kees, *Poems* 138–39)

One hears echoes of T. S. Eliot in these lines. Kees's phrase "inviolate feet" recalls Jesus's "unoffending feet" in "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service." The whole structure of "A Distance from the Sea," considered as a participant's reminiscence years later of events narrated in a Gospel story, recalls Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" and "A Song for Simeon." Just as the final stanza of "Journey of the Magi" begins with the elderly wise man—who seems uncertain about the meaning of what he witnessed in Bethlehem ("were we led all that way for / Birth or Death?")—saying, "All this was a long time ago" (Eliot, *Collected* 69), so the final stanza of "A Distance from the Sea" begins with the elderly disciple saying, "The days get longer. It was a long time ago" (Kees, *Poems* 139). And indeed when Kees sent the poem to *Poetry* magazine, the editor Karl Shapiro rejected it as too "reminiscent of Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi' " (Reidel 277)—though Shapiro seems to have missed the fact that it was intentionally reminiscent as any parody must be, for Kees's purpose in the poem is the direct opposite of the church-going Eliot's.

Significantly, Kees uses the word "staging" twice in the poem. First, he writes that "staging" a miracle "requires / Tact, imagination, a special knack for the job / Not everyone possesses." And second, in the specific context of Jesus's death and resurrection, he mentions: "The careful staging of the cures, the bribed officials, / The angels' garments, tailored faultlessly, / The medicines administered behind the stone, / That ultimate cloud, so perfect, and so opportune." The implication being that Jesus's disciples had staged his resurrection by simply making his body

disappear—recall that Renan had asked, "Had his body been taken away?" Certainly, the vanishing of a body possessed a special resonance for Kees, or as Camus remarks of Kirilov's "pedagogical suicide": "he makes clear that he is not talking of a god-man. It might be thought that this springs from a concern to distinguish himself from Christ. But in reality it is a matter of annexing Christ." This Christ "is the complete man, being the one who realized the most absurd condition. He is not the God-man but the man-god" (Camus 107).

In "A Distance from the Sea," the speaker tries to explain his and his fellow disciples' motive in fabricating Jesus's miracles:

> It was as though the world
> Had been one darkening, abandoned hall
> Where rows of unlit candles stood; and we
> Not out of love, so much, or hope, or even worship, but
> Out of the fear of death, came with our lights
> And watched the candles, one by one, take fire, flames
> Against the long night of our fear. We thought
> That we could never die. Now I am less convinced. (Kees, *Collected* 138)

And with the mention of the fear of death we are suddenly back at the start of Unamuno's *Tragic Sense of Life* and its contention that the human desire for immortality is God's raison d'être. In discussing a purely human alternative—the desire for subjective immortality: one's living on in the minds and hearts of others—Unamuno invokes Renan in a context that would have had special resonance for an artist like Kees:

> Before this terrible mystery of mortality . . . man . . . seeks in various ways to console himself for having been born. And now it occurs to him to take it as a diversion, and he says to himself with Renan that this universe is a spectacle that God presents to Himself, and that it behoves us to carry out the intentions of the great Stage-Manager and contribute to make the spectacle the most brilliant . . . that may be. And they have made a religion of art, a cure for the metaphysical evil, and invented the meaningless phrase of art for art's sake.

> And it does not suffice them. If a man who tells you that he writes, paints, sculptures, or sings for his own amusement, gives his work to the public, he lies; he lies if he puts his name to his writing, painting, statue, or song. He wishes, at the least, to leave behind a shadow of his spirit, something that may survive him . . . The man of letters who shall tell you that he despises fame is a lying rascal. (Unamuno 51)

Unamuno's invocation of "the meaningless phrase of art for art's sake" alludes both to Pater's famous and influential conclusion to *The Renaissance* and to Nietzsche's contention in *The Birth of Tragedy* that the only justification of human existence is aesthetic—two founding texts of the religion of art that flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the wake of Nietzsche's announcing the death of God. But Unamuno judges that this so-called religion is still animated by an attenuated (sublimated) desire for personal survival.

In Dostoyevsky's *The Devils* the reference to Renan's *Vie de Jésus* suggests at least two further links between Dostoyevsky's novel and Unamuno's book-length essay. Near the end of the novel the aging Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky—a philosopher whose reputation has fallen into obscurity but whose ideas, taken up by the younger generation and carried to extremes, apparently drive the destructive revolutionary conduct that pervades the book—breaks with his patroness Varvara Stavrogina and leaves their village on foot. As he wanders about the countryside, he meets a so-called "gospel-woman" (Dostoyevsky 649), who goes from village to village selling copies of the New Testament. Stepan Trofimovich buys a copy, saying " '*Je n'ai rien contre l'Evangile*, and I've been wanting to re-read it for a long time.' The idea occurred to him at the moment that he had not read the gospel for thirty years at least, and at most had recalled some passages of it, seven years before, when reading Renan's *Vie de Jésus*" (Dostoyevsky 650).

Stepan Trofimovich says at one point, "I believe in God, *mais distinguons*, I believe in Him as a Being who is conscious of Himself in me only . . . As for Christianity, for all my genuine respect for it, I'm not a

Christian. I am more of an antique pagan, like the great Goethe, or like an ancient Greek" (Dostoyevsky 34–35). The reference to Renan suggests that Stepan Trofimovich's earlier crisis of belief sprang from a doubt about Jesus's actually being God and not, as Renan contended, just a great man.

Besides the reference to Renan's *Life of Jesus*, the other point of intersection between Unamuno's book and Dostoyevsky's novel is the notion of apocatastasis, a notion that would have been particularly relevant to Kees's sense of the debilitating, not to say despairing, sense of repetition evoked in Camus's phrase as "futile and hopeless labor." One of the chapters of Unamuno's *Tragic Sense of Life* is titled "Religion, the Mythology of the Beyond and the Apocatastasis." It concerns the various theories or imaginings of the afterlife and eternity, which is to say, "the mythology of the beyond." One of the myths that especially interests Unamuno is "what in theology is technically called apocatastasis or restitution" (241). The word *apocatastasis* occurs only once in the New Testament. In chapter 3 of The Acts of the Apostles, Peter cures a lame beggar and then tells the crowd of amazed spectators that this was done not by his own power but by that of Jesus Christ. He continues, "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; And he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you: Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution [apocatastasis] of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouths of all his holy prophets since the world began" (Acts 3: 19–21). The word "apocatastasis," variously translated as "restitution," "restoration," or "reconciliation," refers to the notion that at the end of time God will restore all things to their original state, an idea that probably derived from the ancient notion of a periodic return of a cosmic cycle, e.g., the Platonic "Great Year" or "Perfect Year," approximately 25,800 normal years, the length of one complete cycle of the axial precession of the equinoxes, or as Plato understood it in the *Timaeus*, the period that is required for "the return of the celestial bodies (planets) and the diurnal rotation of the fixed stars (circle of the Same) to their original positions." A literary equivalent of this can be found in Virgil's "Fourth Eclogue"

in the prophecy of the return of a "golden age" when the cycle of time shall begin over again: "A second Tiphys shall then arise, and a second Argo to carry chosen heroes; a second warfare, too, shall there be, and again shall a great Achilles be sent to Troy" (Virgil 1:31). One thinks of a more modern handling of this motif in Yeats's poem "No Second Troy."

In his personal imagining of the beyond in the *Tragic Sense of Life*, Unamuno couples the notion of apocatastasis with that gathering together of all things in God at the end of time, which is prophesied in I Corinthians, chapter 15:26–28: "And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all." Unamuno says this "collecting together . . . , this recapitulation— . . . anacefaleosis—the end of the world's history and the human race, is merely another aspect of the apocatastasis. The apocatastasis, God's coming to be all in all, thus resolves itself into the anacefaleosis, the gathering together of all things in Christ, in Humanity—Humanity therefore being the end of creation" (Unamuno 242).

And pursuing this argument of a final reconciliation or recapitulation, Unamuno follows a well-known line of thinking about the apocatastasis:

> "He shall be all in all," says the Apostle. But will His mode of being in each one be different or will it be the same for all alike? Will not God be wholly in one of the damned? Is He not in his soul? Is He not in what is called hell? And in what sense is He in hell? . . .
>
> May it not be that in the end all shall be saved, including Cain and Judas and Satan himself, as Origen's development of the Pauline apocatastasis led him to hope? (Unamuno 245)

In Dostoyevsky's novel Stepan Trofimovich, as he lies on his deathbed, seems to echo this belief that all shall be saved in the end:

> My immortality is necessary if only because God will not be guilty of injustice and extinguish altogether the flame of love once kindled in my heart. And what is more precious than love? Love is higher than existence, love is the

> crown of existence; and how is it possible that existence should not be under its dominance? If I have once loved Him and rejoiced in my love, is it possible that He should extinguish me and my joy and bring me to nothingness again? If there is a God, then I am immortal. Voilà ma profession de foi. (Dostoyevsky 673–74)

Stepan Trofimovich's penultimate sentence (that if there's a God, then he [Stepan] is immortal) resonates in reverse in the central contention of the *Tragic Sense of Life* that the reason for God's existence is man's desire for personal immortality, that by definition God is the Being who gives individual human consciousness the power to survive death. Earlier in Dostoyevsky's novel Stepan Trofimovich, speaking at the fête given by the governor and his wife, tells the audience, whose various factions replicate those present in contemporary Russia, "I have come forward with an olive branch. I bring you the last word, for in this business I have the last word—and we shall be reconciled . . . Messieurs, the last word in this business—is forgiveness" (Dostoyevsky 494). This is a reconciliation of all men in mutual forgiveness that anticipates Stepan's reconciliation with God on his death bed and that foreshadows the final reconciliation of all things in Christ at the end of time.

* * *

But what would Kees, in reading Dostoyevsky and Unamuno, have made of the notion of a final apocatastasis? He would have found two books that treat man's loss of belief in God and immortality as leading inevitably to the question of suicide: in Unamuno's case to a despairing suicide caused by the vanishing of human faith in the God-man, the consequent sense of death as an annihilation, and thus the meaninglessness of life deprived of a transcendental goal, and in Dostoyevsky's case to the programmatic suicide of a figure like Kirillov, who will have man occupy the empty space in the great chain of being once occupied by God (the space Nietzsche called "Over Man") by taking ultimate control of his own destiny, which is to say, the previously-divine, absolute power over life and death. According to Kirillov, in committing suicide man annihilates the fear of

death and becomes, in effect, the man-god. But what Kees would have also found in these two books was the religious notion of the ultimate, transcendent goal of time as a return to an original state, which is to say, a divine zero-sum game in which all the triumphs and tragedies of human history would be rendered ultimately meaningless as the circle of time returns to its starting point, a starting point at which—as Origen theorizes in pondering Paul's religious platonizing, his recasting Plato's "Great Year" as the Christian apocacatastasis—even the damned, even Satan, will ultimately be saved. (Taking a clue from Stepan Trofimovich, the reasoning behind this ultimate universal salvation would go like this: The absolute perfection of justice and love that are necessary attributes of an omnipotent and omniscient deity would not permit that God could create a soul knowing in advance that this soul's ultimate destiny was to be damned for all eternity.) Thus the two alternatives Kees would have found in both Dostyevsky and Unamuno's books amount to the same thing: either no transcendence, in which case man is trapped in the boring, debilitating temporal repetitions of human existence; or transcendence, in which case time's end is a return to an original state, to the starting point, a Christianizing of the pagan notion of a periodically recurring cosmic cycle. Either earthly repetition or a transcendent cycle of repetition—but repetition nonetheless. And why? Because human consciousness has its being in time and cannot realistically imagine the existence of a conscious being outside of the temporal, any more than thought can think the total absence of thought in death. Indeed, Unamuno in the chapter on "Religion, the Mythology of the Beyond and the Apocatastasis" specifically describes his own myth of the afterlife as a heaven involving time and change. Noting that the usual conception of "the heaven of eternal glory" is "a place of eternal boredom" (Unamuno 228–29), he says, "What we really long for after death is to go on living this life, this same mortal life, but without its ills, without its tedium, and without death . . . And what but that is the meaning of that comic conception of *eternal recurrence* which issued from the tragic soul of poor Nietzsche, hungering for concrete and temporal immortality?" (Unamuno 231). The phrase "without tedium" is

telling. A heaven of stasis is "a place of eternal boredom"—the very thing Stevens evokes in the question "Is there no change of death in paradise?" But Unamuno realizes that in his own dream of a temporal, changing heaven the inevitable repetitions, the predictable cyclic recurrences that structure the persistence of self-consciousness, are equally tedious and boring. In Dostoyevsky's novel, soon after Stepan Trofimovich's speech at the fête, he bids a histrionic farewell to his young friend, the novel's narrator, saying, "I do not wish you much happiness—it will bore you. I do not wish you trouble either, but, following the philosophy of the peasants, I will repeat simply 'Live more' and try not to be much bored; this useless wish I add from myself" (Dostoyevsky 500).

Chapter Four

"The dynamics of inferential mention"

Wallace Stevens's and Hart Crane's Influence on Kees

If tedious repetition, if the predictable and unavoidable recurrences that structure temporal self-consciousness, are the medium that grounds Camus's sense of "futile and hopeless labor," then the existential boredom evoked in Kees's poem "Round" suggests that Wallace Stevens's is the right name to add to those of Dostoyevsky and Unamuno in this discussion. Where Unamuno is concerned with restoring belief in the God-man as the existential alternative to suicide and Kirillov is interested in suicide as the means to assume absolute control of his own destiny and become the man-god, Stevens in his later poetry is concerned with elaborating a figure he calls variously "major man," the "man-hero," or "man-man." This possible being is Stevens's attempt to project either the perfection of the human or an evolutionary surpassing of the human analogous to Nietzsche's concept of the Overman, the theoretical species that would someday come to occupy the category formerly occupied by God in the great chain of being. In his poem "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War," Stevens says of his own imaginary figure:

The highest man with nothing higher
Than himself, his self, the self that embraces
The self of the hero, the solar single,
Man-sun, man-moon, man-earth, man-ocean,
Makes poems on the syllable of *fa* or
Jumps from the clouds or, from his window,
Sees the petty gildings on February…
The man-sun being hero rejects that
False empire…These are the works and pastimes
Of the highest self: he studies the paper
On the wall, the lemons on the table.
This is his day. With nothing lost, he
Arrives at the man-man as he wanted.
This is his night and meditation. (Stevens 205)

And in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens connects this figure (who may, as Nietzsche says of Overman, be as different from ordinary man as man is from the apes) with the problem of repetition:

Red robin, stop in your preludes, practicing
Mere repetitions. These things at least comprise
An occupation, an exercise, a work,

A thing final in itself and, therefore, good:
One of the vast repetitions final in
Themselves and, therefore, good, the going round

And round and round, the merely going round,
Until merely going round is a final good,
The way wine comes at a table in a wood.

And we enjoy like men, the way a leaf
Above the table spins its constant spin,
So that we look at it with pleasure, look

At it spinning its eccentric measure. Perhaps
The man-hero is not the exceptional monster,
But he that of repetition is most master. (Stevens 231–32)

In the absence of God and an afterlife, Stevens says in "Asides on the Oboe," "It is a question, now, / Of final belief. / So say that final belief / Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose" (Stevens 187). And in the three sections of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens outlines the general characteristics of any fiction worthy of final belief: "*It Must Be Abstract*," "*It Must Change*," "*It Must Give Pleasure*." Stevens understood that the mastery of repetition synonymous with "the man-hero" required the substitution of a purely human valorizing of repetition for the previous religious valorizing represented by the Christian liturgical cycle. This cycle's aligning of the seasons of the year and certain dates on the calendar with events in the life of a dying-and-reviving god and the lives of his mother, stepfather, disciples, and saints turned the formerly meaningless round of the year into a day-by-day recapitulation, in the lives of believers, of a drama of transcendence.

When Stevens in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" says that "merely going round is a final good" and then immediately gives as an example "The way wine comes at a table in a wood. // And we enjoy like men, the way a leaf / Above the table spins its constant spin, / So that we look at it with pleasure, look // At its spinning its eccentric measure," we recognize, from his use of the images of "wine" and "leaves" in other poems, that the two are meant to evoke respectively the Christian religion and the religion of art. "Wine" is Stevens's recurrent metonym for the central liturgical ritual of Christianity, the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Thus in "The American Sublime," confronting the absence of a religious sense of sublimity, he asks what would be the ritual of communion and community among those believing in a purely human (i.e., poetic) sublime: "And the sublime comes down / To the spirit itself, // The spirit and space / The empty spirit / In vacant space. / What wine does one

drink? / What bread does one eat?" (Stevens 114). And in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," meditating on the interplay of imaginative art and the world, he invokes the image of "the fruit and wine, / The book and bread, things as they are, // In a chiaroscuro where / One sits and plays the blue guitar" and then a few lines later asks, "Am I a man that is dead // At a table on which the food is cold? / Is my thought a memory, not alive? // Is the spot on the floor, there, wine or blood / And whichever it may be, is it mine?" (Stevens 140). Similarly, with the image of "leaves" Stevens makes clear in his poem "Domination of Black" that it refers to the leaves of the poet's book, an image borrowed from the conclusion of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" where the poet asks the west wind to "Drive my dead thoughts over the universe / Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth! / And, by the incantation of this verse, / Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth / Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!" And with an allusion as well to Whitman's "Leaves of Grass."

In Stevens's "Domination of Black" he plays on the etymological roots of key words: "At night, by the fire / The colors of the bushes / And of the fallen leaves / Repeating themselves, / Turned in the room, / Like the leaves themselves / Turning in the wind" (Stevens 14). The leaves outside "turn" (Latin *versus*, furrow, line, verse; and Greek *tropos*, a trope or figure of speech, a turn of phrase) in the "room" (Italian *stanza*, room), "in the wind" (the traditional Romantic figure of poetic in*spir*ation). The phrase "colors of the bushes" recalls the old designation of the variety of rhetorical tropes as "the colors of rhetoric."

Thus, when Stevens says that "wine comes at a table in the woods," he means for the reader first to register the wine's religious connotation of communion and community, but then to see that this wine is not the transubstantiated blood of a god but rather simply the real thing, one of those "things as they are" that must be played on the blue guitar. And this wine binds not a supernatural community but a purely human one ("And we enjoy like men"). This community enjoys "the way a leaf / Above the table spins its constant spin, / So that we look at it with pleasure" (*It Must Give Pleasure*), look at the leaves of the poet's book turning in the wind of

inspiration, "look // At it spinning its eccentric measure," the measured, metrical turnings of verse and trope that represent the religion of art's mastery of repetition. But this valorizing mastery of the repetitive structure of human time-consciousness, of memory—which Stevens projects for the theoretical "man-hero" or "major man"—is clearly not available to the poet of "Round." In "Problems of a Journalist" (a poem published in 1947 in *Poetry* magazine two years prior to the publication of "Round" but placed in a section of his volume *Poems 1947–1954* later than that containing "Round") Kees confronts the kind of boredom that both causes and springs from the repeated and predictable failure of one's velleities:

> "I want to get away somewhere and re-read Proust,"
> Said an editor of *Fortune* to a man on *Time*.
> But the fire roared and died, the phoenix quacked like a goose,
> And all roads to the country fray like shawls
> Outside the dusk of suburbs. Pacing the halls
> Where mile-high windows frame a dream with witnesses,
> You taste, fantast and epicure, the names of towns along the coast,
> Black roadsters throbbing on the highways blue with rain
> Toward one lamp burning on those sentences.

From May to September 1943 Kees worked for *Time* magazine as a book reviewer and sometime film and music reviewer. On the recommendation of Malcolm Cowley, he had been hired by, and at first worked for, Robert Cantwell. Cantwell, a novelist and in later life a biographer, had worked on the editorial staffs of *Time* (1935–36) and *Fortune* (1937) and was an associate editor at *Time* from 1938 to 1945. It was very much in the ethos of the Luce publications of this era to employ as journalists writers with serious literary credentials or aspirations, as evidenced by the long-time association of John Dos Passos with *Life* or the briefer association of Kees and James Agee with *Time*. In a June 15, 1942, letter to his friend Norris Getty, Kees passed on some literary gossip from New York: "Robert Cantwell has had an acute nervous breakdown, brought on, apparently, by overwork for Henry Luce and worry over his inability

to finish the novel he's been trying to bring to an end for years" (Kees, *Letters* 65). Kees did not enjoy working for Cantwell, whom he found unpredictable and peremptory. If one had to suggest a real-life model for the "editor of *Fortune*" who speaks to the "man on *Time*," it would be Cantwell, particularly because of the self-deflating irony of what the editor is given to say. It sounds as if his getting away somewhere to "re-read Proust" referred simply to a couple of weeks in the country or a vacation drive down the coast during the intervals of which he would knock off the six hefty volumes of dense prose that constitute *À la recherche du temps perdu*. But even more subtle is the fact that in a sophisticated set of serious writers who felt that they were above their jobs as journalists, their inherent one-upmanship would never allow anyone to admit that he was reading one of the acknowledged classics of modern literature for the very first time; rather he would always say that he was *re-reading* Proust. So the projected activity that opens the poem is already presented as a repetition and is followed immediately by an image of cyclic return: "But the fire roared and died, the phoenix quacked like a goose." The story of the phoenix, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is that of "a mythical bird, of gorgeous plumage, fabled to be the only one of its kind, and to live five or six hundred years in the Arabian desert, after which it burnt itself to ashes on a funeral pyre of aromatic twigs ignited by the sun and fanned by its own wings, but only to emerge from its ashes with renewed youth, to live through another cycle of years" (*OED* 2156). If the editor's forlorn wish to get away somewhere and re-read Proust represents a serious writer's desire to get back to producing literature rather than journalism, then does the fire that roars represent the hoped-for return of the creative flame? And when it dies, is what emerges from the ashes not a one-of-a-kind creature of gorgeous plumage, but something that "quacks like a goose"? Additionally, in making the speaker of this wish specifically an editor of *Fortune*, a journal concerned with monetary success, Kees seems to suggest that the man has sold out, trading the difficult life of a literary artist for the more remunerative work of editing the writing of others. (In a letter dated December 16, 1943, Kees reported on a meet-

ing with Edmund Wilson in which Wilson "kept asking me to tell him about my experiences on *Time*. 'What about Cantwell?' he kept insisting; later on he revealed that he was working on a piece showing how Luce ruins promising writers—a thesis one should have little trouble in proving" [Kees, *Letters* 87]). And in the poem's next image, which invokes "all roads to the country"—the place the editor apparently wants to go to renew himself—the roads never get beyond the editor's home in the suburbs, to which he returns at dusk.

At *Time*, Kees worked on the twenty-ninth and thirtieth floors of the Time-Life Building in Manhattan. He described the environment there in a May 18, 1943, letter to his friend Maurice Johnson: "One thing I have learned: you can tell nothing of what people are actually on the magazine from looking at the masthead. Walker Evans, for instance, is doing movies; James Stern, art. One bumps into such people as Howard Moss and Reuel Denney. The place itself reminds me a little of a college dormitory: people are always wandering around the halls, dropping into one's office to talk" (Kees, *Letters* 80). Thus in the poem, the setting—in which this day-dreaming connoisseur of imaginary getaway locations is addressed as "fantast and epicure" and described as "pacing the halls / Where mile-high windows frame a dream with witnesses"—seems to be based on the twenty-ninth floor at *Time*. The witnesses are either workers in other office buildings who glimpse through these mile-high windows the goings-on at the magazine or else the other writers at *Time* who wander the halls and drop in to talk. In either case there is the sense of being trapped in frustrated hopes and of being observed (and not sympathetically) by someone who may be equally trapped in the same fate.

One can't help but be reminded here of the daydreaming office workers in the second stanza of Hart Crane's "To Brooklyn Bridge." In that poem's first stanza a gull is shown soaring above the Statue of Liberty and vanishing from sight. In the next stanza the bird's flight becomes for the office workers gazing out at it from their skyscraper an image of perfect freedom "as apparitional as sails that cross / Some page of figures to be filed away; / —Till elevators drop us from our day" (Crane, *Bridge* 45).

These stanzas associate the images of wing and sail as figures of voyaging (either real or imaginary) throughout *The Bridge*. And indeed, Crane's is the right name to invoke here, for as both a poetic and an existential influence, as both a source of echoes and allusions in Kees's poetry and an embodiment of the possible fate of an American poet in the twentieth century, Crane represented one pole of an opposition whose other pole for Kees was T. S. Eliot. And the image that concludes the first stanza of "Problems of a Journalist"—the editor as "fantast and epicure" savoring "the names of towns along the coast" and romantically dreaming of "black roadsters throbbing on highways blue with rain" that would take him to his getaway place where "one lamp" was "burning on those sentences" (presumably from Proust's novel)—recalls a passage from Baudelaire's "Le Voyage" that Eliot was fond of quoting:

> Pour l'enfant, amoureux de cartes et d'estampes.
> L'univers est égal à son vaste appétit.
> Ah! que le monde est grand à la clarté des lampes!
> Aux yeux du souvenir que le monde est petit! (Eliot, *Selected* 66)

As the lamplight in the French poem evokes the child's imaginative daydreaming about the world's grandeur, an imagining cut down to size by adult memories, so the "one lamp burning on those sentences" of a French novel evokes the editor's daydreaming about getting back to literature from journalism. The word "burning" has its own deflating resonance, harking back, in the editor's case, to the fire that roared and died and produced a phoenix that quacked like a goose.

This deflation continues with the repetition that begins the poem's final stanza:

> "I want to get away somewhere and re-read Proust,"
> Said an editor of *Newsweek* to a man on *Look*.
> Dachaus with telephones, Siberias with bonuses.
> One reads, as winter settles on the town,
> The evening paper, in an Irving Place café. (Kees, *Collected* 126)

The daydream is the same but the magazines are different (a step down from *Fortune* and *Time*). The situation of serious writers working as well-paid, slick magazine journalists is evoked, through a hyperbolic allusion to Nazi and Soviet detention camps, as a comfortable, though creatively deadening, servitude. Further, at the end the poem's speaker seems to find himself in the same situation as the four journalists: at the dead time of year he has not gotten away to the country to read serious literature, but instead sits reading a newspaper in a Manhattan café located on a street bearing the name of a famous nineteenth-century American fiction writer.

For Kees the deadening monotony of repetition and the existential boredom it turns into are not simply a matter of the *same thing* being repeated over and over again, like the phrases in "Round" or the sentence in "Problems of a Journalist." This monotony is also a matter of the *sameness of emotional affect* produced when a seemingly endless number of *different things* are all experienced either as ephemeral and trivial events or else as serious and tragic ones. But though these serious events are present to us as their observers or hearers, we are not equally present to as participants or actors, as, for example, with world news heard on the radio or read in a daily paper. Kees evokes this condition in an early poem, "Statement with Rhymes," first published in *Poetry* magazine in May 1939:

> Plurality is all. I walk among the restaurants,
> the theatres, the grocery stores; I ride the cars
> and hear of Mrs. Bedford's teeth and Albuquerque,
> strikes unsettled, someone's simply marvelous date,
> news of the German Jews, the baseball scores,
> storetalk and whoretalk, talk of wars. (Kees, *Collected* 4)

At the time the poem was published, the outbreak of the Second World War was only three months away, and the "news of the German Jews" is likely a reference to the worldwide outrage at Kristallnacht, the pogrom that began on November 9–10, 1938, with the smashing of windows in synagogues and Jewish-owned stores in Germany and Austria.

The speaker of the poem is a flâneur, an urban stroller picking up scraps of conversation as he moves through public places or rides on public conveyances, momentarily attracted by the sheer heterogeneity of what he collects but emotionally involved in none of it. This sophisticated connoisseur of the streets, at once *ennuyé* and *épuisé*, is a descendant of Baudelaire's "disengaged and cynical voyeur" via Jules Laforgue's effete and world-weary lounger, as well as an inheritor of that tone of voice the early Eliot borrowed from Laforgue. For the speaker the plight of the German Jews commands no more affect than do the baseball scores or Mrs. Bedford's teeth. And the poem's next lines suggest the speaker's kinship to the figure of the Parisian boulevardier, strolling past the book stalls along the Seine and sampling volumes:

> I turn
> the pages of a thousand books to read
> the names of Buddha, Malthus, Walker Evans, Stendhal, André Gide,
> Ouspenski; note the terms: obscurantism,
> factorize, fagaceous, endocarp; descend
> the nervous stairs to hear the broken ends
> of songs that float through city air. (Kees, *Collected* 4)

The proper names—an ancient Indian religious figure, a nineteenth-century English political economist, a twentieth-century American photographer, a nineteenth-century French novelist, a twentieth-century French novelist, and a twentieth-century Russian pseudo-mystic—are meant to evoke not only the same kind of bewildering heterogeneity the speaker has observed in the streets but also to suggest, in the pairing of Buddha at the beginning and Ouspenski at the end, the eternal recurrence of the desire for mystical transcendence, along with the predictable Eliotic sense of decline from ancient to modern. A disciple of the Russian mystic or esotericist George Gurdjieff, P. D. Ouspensky (1878–1947) published his pseudoscientific insights concerning the fourth dimension and the "higher consciousness" in his book *Tertium Organum*, an English translation of which was brought out by Knopf in 1922 and became a

favorite, not to say sacred, book for Hart Crane early in his poetic career. As Crane's biographer John Unterecker notes, Ouspensky's "strange book" seemed a cross between "theosophy and popular science" and "stressed the importance of the creative artist as forerunner of a new race of supermen. The artist, Ouspensky maintained, had an inkling of the world of the higher consciousness in which opposites were reconciled and creative activity was accomplished through the motive force of love" (Unterecker 247–48). So taken was Crane with Ouspensky's book that he even went so far as to quote a line from it in part one of his poem "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen": "*There is the world dimensional for / those untwisted by the love of things / irreconcilable*…" (Crane, *Complete* 28). We should note that the mention of Ouspenski in "Statement with Rhymes" is the earliest of the many traces of Crane's presence in Kees's poetry.

Like the list of names, the specialized terms the speaker notes—"obscurantism, / factorize, fagaceous, endocarp"—are drawn from a variety of fields (philosophy and literature, social science, botany) and again bespeak the flâneur's dilettantish browsings. And the sense of decline is physically evoked as descent: "descend / the nervous stairs to hear the broken ends / of songs that float through city air." I have always imagined that the setting for most of the speaker's musings in the poem is not a restaurant, a theatre, or a grocery but rather a department store—which is to say, a large commercial space for gathering together many different items that are more or less arbitrarily (that is, alphabetically) organized by their generic names. To me, the "nervous stairs" is a poetic evocation of the escalator the speaker takes from an upper floor down to the mezzanine, where the music department is likely located and where he hears clerks demonstrating sheet music—"the broken ends of songs"—for customers, as they did in department stores in the 1910s, '20s, and '30s. If this is the setting, it would have been foreshadowed by the word "storetalk" in line six of the poem and confirmed by several later images, as we shall see.

At any rate, the speaker's evocation of the way sheer multiplicity drains away significance continues in the poem's next lines:

In Osnabrück and Ogden, on the Passamaquoddy Bay,
in Ahmednagar, Waco (Neb.), in Santa Fé,
propelled by zeros, zinc, and zephyrs, always I'm pursued
by thoughts of what I am, authority, remembrance, food,
the letter on the mezzanine, the unemployed, dogs' lonely faces, pianos
and decay.

From a German town (Osnabrück) to a city in western India (Ahmednagar) to a town in the US (Santa Fé), Kees creates an image that is meant as a microcosmic equivalent of "everywhere" but that also contains a disorienting multiplicity within it. There are no less than ten towns named "Ogden" in the United States and no less than thirteen named "Waco," though Kees specifies that this one is in Nebraska, located one county to the northwest of Kees's birthplace in Beatrice, Nebraska. But the very fact of needing to specify the state is meant to suggest how many other Wacos there are. And just as the first and last names (Buddha and Ouspenski) in the list of persons earlier in the poem had pointed to the persistence of the human need for some form of mystical transcendence, so the first and last names in the list of towns (Osnabrück and Santa Fé) point to another kind of religious persistence. The German town was known in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for the number of witches executed there, but also in the twentieth for the persecution of "the German Jews." The New Mexican town's name means "Holy Faith." The second word of its name echoes the last word in "*auto da fé*." (Kees had been trained as a reference librarian at the University of Denver Library School and had worked for several years at the Denver Public Library, so the sort of arcane knowledge and subterranean linkings of information that characterize much of his poetry are not unexpected for this background. Moreover, Kees had clearly been influenced by Hart Crane's poetic method: "the logic of metaphor"—what Crane called "the dynamics of inferential mention"—whereby the associative logic of a poem depended as much, if not more, on the connotations of words rather than on their denotations.) We should also note that besides Santa

Fé, New Mexico, there is a Santa Fé in Texas near Galveston, but this one was named not by Spanish missionaries. It took its name from the Santa Fe Railroad that ran through it. Perhaps the implied railroad presence here subconsciously primed the next association in the poem.

The speaker says that his travels are "propelled by zeros, zinc, and zephyrs"—the "zeros" apparently referring to the accumulating digits in the number of miles he's covered and perhaps the emptiness he experiences everywhere, while the word "zephyrs" calls up the image of someone being blown hither and yon by the west wind. But it also evokes the fast travel provided either by several streamlined railroad trains in the 1930s and '40s named "Zephyr," such as the Denver Zephyr (whose first year of regular operation between Chicago and Denver was 1936) or the streamlined Lincoln-Zephyr automobile produced by Ford from 1936–40. However, the deeper significance of these three words all beginning with Z, considered as a single unit of meaning, is their evocation of the speaker's being "propelled" to the end of an alphabetic (i.e., arbitrary) ordering of a limitless number of phenomena.

Note that the list of heterogeneous things that always pursue the speaker ends with "pianos and decay." If we are right in suspecting that the setting of most of the speaker's musings is a department store, a space alphabetically organized according to the generic names of the items for sale, then the "letter on the mezzanine" coupled with "pianos and decay" strengthens our sense that the store's music department is on that floor. These, taken with the poem's concluding image of the speaker ringing for the elevator to leave, suggest that "the letter on the mezzanine" is the letter *M* above the elevator door (but a letter that might also stand for Music). The combination of letters and numbers often displayed above elevator doors in multi-story buildings such as department stores—with *B* indicating the basement, *G* the ground floor, *M* the mezzanine, and the other floors designated by numbers—implicates two different ordering systems, one necessary, the other arbitrary—two systems we imbibe imperceptibly as children when we learn to count and memorize the order of the alphabet. With a necessary order such as a numerical se-

ries, I know that the number 2 comes after the number 1 and before the number 3 because the series progresses according to the order $n + 1$ to infinity. But with an arbitrary order like the alphabet, there is no logical necessity according to which *B* comes after *A* and before *C*; there is only an historical explanation for this traditional, more or less random arrangement of letters. And by as much as our intuition of the speaker's standing on the mezzanine contemplating the combination of letters and numbers above the elevator door evokes two different methods of ordering the world's ceaseless plurality of objects and events—that is, the speaker's understanding that he can either count these things or arrange them according to the first letters of their names—this implies his further understanding that neither of these orderings succeeds, that the sheer number of *different* things endlessly repeated insures that nothing *makes a difference*. The attempt to count this multiplicity so as to create a totalizing vision will ultimately mean that nothing really counts—an existentialist version of Kant's thought-dissolving "mathematical sublime." Also I take it that the stanza's final phrase, "pianos and decay," involves a pun on the last word. One of its meanings evokes Kees's persistent sense of cultural decline, of a kind of historical entropy in human affairs. The other, musical meaning refers to the way of evaluating an instrument according to how its sound lingers and then subsides when a note is struck (perhaps as well it is a figuration of the persistence or subsidence of a poet's voice). Not unexpectedly, the poem's last stanza begins with a repetition of the poem's opening words:

> Plurality is all. I sympathize, but cannot grieve
> too long for those who wear their dialectics on their sleeves.
> The pattern's one I sometimes rather like; there's really nothing wrong
> with it for some. But I should add: It doesn't wear for long,
> before I push the elevator bell and quickly leave. (Kees, *Collected* 4)

Those "who wear their dialectics on their sleeves" are the pseudo- or amateur Marxists or Communists so prevalent in artistic and writerly circles in the 1930s, and one sees the irony of the speaker, who is pursued

by the thought of "the unemployed," thinking about dialectics in a department store, an American fortress of consumer capitalism. Though the speaker says he sympathizes with their need to make sense of history as dialectical materialism, still the "pattern" of Hegelian thesis-antithesis-synthesis "doesn't wear for long." The thisworldliness of dialectical materialism is the antithesis of the recurring human need for religious or mystical transcendence represented by the names of Buddha and Ouspenski, but with no synthesis possible between the two. Yet the poem's speaker, like Baudelaire and Laforgue, is a flâneur *and* a poet, attentive to "the broken ends / of songs that float through city air" (the word echoing Crane's last great poem "The Broken Tower"). And where does the poet fit in between these two opposing world-views? So the speaker rings the elevator bell, descends, and leaves. From the word "descend" in line ten, to the word "decay" in line seventeen, to the speaker's leave taking as a descent in an elevator, a pattern is established that we will see often in Kees's poetry and that foreshadows his own final descent.

Just as the device (in lines 8 and 9 of "Statement with Rhymes" [1939]) of listing well-known (and not-so-well-known) persons from various times and places is, in effect, repeated some ten years later in "Round" (1949) with its cast of Marvell, Renan, Royal Cortissoz, and Cézanne, so the device of listing geographic locales in lines 13 and 14 of "Statement in Rhymes" recurs some fourteen years later in Kees's long poem, "Travels in North America" (1953). The poem is based in part on the cross-country drive that Kees and his wife made in 1950 when they moved from New York to San Francisco. At the poem's start, the speaker is looking at a map tracing their journey across the continent and trying to remember the places they've passed through or stopped:

> Here is San Luis Obispo. Here
> Is Kansas City, and here is Rovere,
> Kentucky. And here, a small black dot,
> Unpronounceable but hard to forget,
> Is where we stopped at the Seraphim Motel. (Kees, *Collected* 114)

And what made the Seraphim Motel memorable, the speaker tells us, was that there "well-fed moths flew out to greet us from the walls." The next locale mentioned is Santa Barbara, where Kees's parent had moved in 1953 and where the poem's speaker says, "My hair / Fell out in Santa Barbara, and the cold / Came blowing off the sea" (Kees, *Collected* 114). In each of the various places the speaker recalls visiting, some personal memory comes up, most involving an image of decline, decay, or an ever-increasing vulgarity. Next on the itinerary the speaker recalls "the highway in and out of Cincinnati" with the car radio playing "five solid and remembered hours / Of gospel singers and New Orleans jazz, / With terse, well-phrased commercials for a funeral home." The radio program fades out and makes way "for Evansville and Patti Page. The roads end / At motels. The one that night had an Utrillo in a velvet frame" (Kees, *Collected* 114–15). In New Mexico around Santa Fe and Albuquerque "Sand drifts at noon, at nine, / And now at midnight on a Navajo in levis reading / Sartre in an Avon Pocket Book, against the window / Of a Rexall store. Here one descends / To shelvings of the pit" (Kees, *Collected* 115). Next it's Los Alamos and the "tall young men in uniform" keeping watch on "The University of California's atom bomb" near "the peaks of mountains— / Sangre de Christo, Blood of Christ, this 'fitting portent / For the Capital of the Atomic Age' " (Kees, *Collected* 115). The speaker then muses that "possibly the towns one never sees are best . . . merely names and distances." He runs through a list of these, towns that are the "shifting centers of a dream, / Swept bare of formica and television aerials / And rows of cars that look a little more like fish each year": "A dream that ends with towns that smell of rubber smouldering; / A brownish film sticks to the windshields / And the lungs" (Kees, *Collected* 116). And at this point the speaker registers the maddening sameness not only of his temporal immersion in an endless series of different places and things but also the individual sameness of so many of these different American places:

> And sometimes, shivering in St. Paul or baking in Atlanta,
> The sudden sense that you have seen it all before:

The man who took your ticket at the Gem in Council Bluffs
Performed a similar function for you at the Shreveport Tivoli.
Joe's Lunch appears again, town after town, next door
To Larry's Shoe Repair, adjoining, inescapably the Acme Doughnut Shop.
Main, First, and Market fuse together.
Bert and Lena run the laundromat. John Foster, D.D.S.
Has offices above the City Bank. (Kees, *Collected* 116)

The speaker concludes, "You have forgotten singularities" (Kees, *Collected* 117). Paradoxically, he then launches into a brief list of specific things in Boston and San Francisco he has forgotten, the locations, in effect, bracketing the continent. And he ends by noting you "have forgotten why you left or why you came to where you are, / Or by what roads and passages, / Or what it was, if anything, that you were hoping for" (Kees, *Collected* 117). Clearly if an endless repetition of different things and places erodes the sense of the singularity of any one of them, then this process erodes as well the sense of the self's singularity, that uniqueness, that special value, of every individual, that is a mainstay of belief in a God whose eye, as the hymn says, "is on the sparrow so you know He watches me." At this point in "Travels in North America" the speaker makes explicit the geographic symbolism that has governed America almost since the discovery of the New World: the notion that on this continent there exists a spatial solution to temporal problems:

Journeys are ways of marking out a distance,
Or dealing with the past, however ineffectually,
Or ways of searching for some new enclosure in this space
Between the oceans. (Kees, *Collected* 117)

The original settlers who left the Old World and journeyed west to the New often fled countries or societies where either their own personal past or their ancestors' social standing had fixed them in a class or a locale that foreclosed any possible improvement of their lot. But when they left the Old World for the New what they found in the North American wilder-

ness was the oldest world of all—the New Eden, a world before time and history began, a world in which they could leave their past behind and start afresh. What they gained was the sense of an infinite second chance that was to persist in the mythology of America's westward expansion. The notion that if your past, the burden of your personal history, had become so much of an obstacle that it foreclosed your future, then one could always pull up stakes, head west, change one's name, and start over. And, further, that a person could repeat this westward search for a new start as often as necessary. In "Travels in North America," Kees, in effect, confronts the failure of this myth about a spatial solution to temporal problems on this continent. When Kees and his wife Ann moved from New York to San Francisco in 1950 he was no doubt seeking a fresh start ("marking out a distance" and "dealing with the past, however ineffectually"), but by 1953, when "Travels in North America" was published, he found himself still caught in time's repetitive coils. And in an image that recurs in several of Kees's poems of this period, the speaker in "Travels" confronts the limit of westward continental expansion as he gazes at the detritus cast on shore by the Pacific Ocean:

> Now the smaller waves of afternoon retrace
> This sand where breakers threw their cargoes up—
> Old rafts and spongy two-by-fours and inner tubes,
> The spines of sharks and broken codheads,
> Tinned stuff with labels gone, and yellow weeds
> Like entrails; mattresses and stones, and, by a grapefruit crate,
> A ragged map, imperfectly enclosed by seaworn oilskin.
> Two tiny scarlet crabs run out as I unfold it on the beach.
> Here, sodden, fading, green ink turning into blue,
> Is Brooklyn Heights, and I am walking toward the subway
> In a January snow again, at night, ten years ago. (Kees, *Collected* 117)

On a California beach, the speaker sees Brooklyn Heights on the sodden map and is suddenly transported in memory back ten years to the East Coast. And this imagery of debris washed ashore by the tide is probably

meant to recall as well the poem "Land's End," published in *Harper's* magazine in October 1949 while Kees was still in the East. Its setting no doubt is the beach in Provincetown, Massachusetts on Cape Cod where Kees and his wife spent much time between 1948 and 1950:

> Here where I built my life ten years ago,
> The day breaks gray and cold;
> And brown surf, muddying the shore,
> Deposits fish-heads, sewage, rusted tin.
> Children and men break bottles on the stones.
> Beyond the lighthouse, black against the sky,
> Two gulls are circling where the woods begin. (Kees, *Collected* 108)

This concluding image of circling would, in effect, amplify the sense in "Travels in North America" of a turnaround by which the western shore of the continent sends the speaker back in memory to the eastern, thus suggesting the psychological circularity of his transcontinental journey. Similarly in Kees's poem "Back" (published in *Harper's* magazine in December 1949), the speaker begins, "Much cry and little wool: / I have come back / As empty handed as I went." It continues "I had meant / My trip as a search for stones":

> But the beach was bare
> Except for the drying bones
> Of a fish, shells, an old wool
>
> Shirt, a rubber boot,
> A strip of lemon rind.
> They were not what I had in mind…
>
> Much cry and little wool:
> I have come back
> As empty-handed as I went. (Kees, *Collected* 120)

The expected Keesian repetition of the opening lines at the end makes the poem turn back on itself, much as the tide (the modern word *tide*

from a Middle English word meaning *time* or *a period of time)* carries something out to sea and then casts it back on shore—like the speaker of "Back" who has gone out empty-handed and come back the same.

Kees makes the temporal significance of the flotsam-on-the-beach image explicit in his early poem "To the North" from the volume *The Last Man* (1943). The poem concludes,

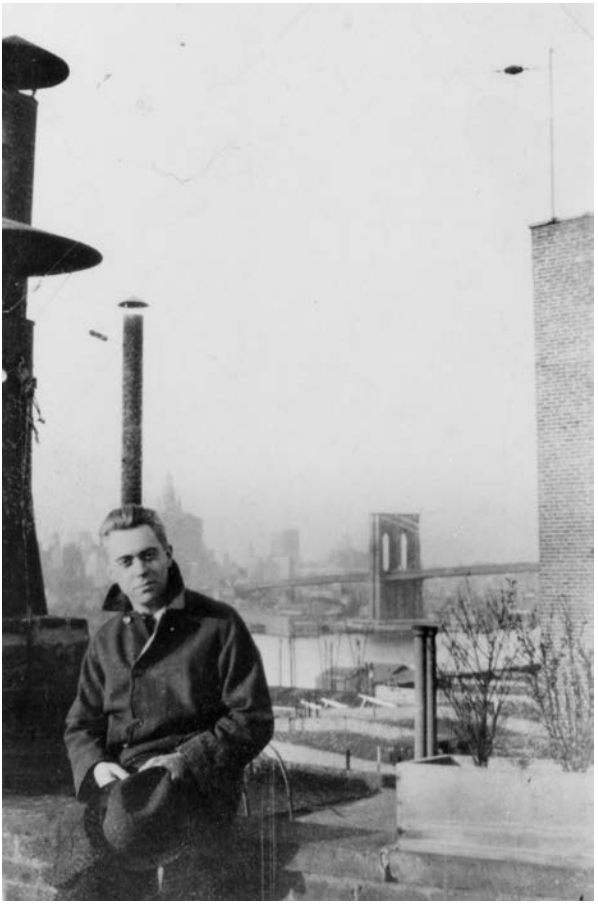
> Where is the grave
> Of Time? What would you picture for decay?
> A horse's hoof, white bones, a lifeless tree,
> Cold hemispheres, dried moss, and a blue wave
> Breaking at noon on shores you will not see. (Kees, *Collected* 28)

But here the random objects, whose heterogeneity is meant to evoke their infinity, are not deposited on shore by a breaking wave but instead lead into that image, implying that everything in the world is ultimately debris caught in the tide of time.

The key phrase that culminates the debris imagery in "Travels in North America" is "Brooklyn Heights." Kees and his wife lived in an apartment in Brooklyn Heights at 144 Willow Street in the late 1940s. As Reidel makes clear, part of the attraction of the neighborhood for Kees was the fact that Hart Crane had lived there at 110 Columbia Heights when he was working on *The Bridge*. Indeed, perhaps the single, best-known photo of Crane shows him on the roof of 110 Columbia Heights with the lower Manhattan skyline and the Brooklyn Bridge in the background. Reidel notes that when Kees's friend Norris Getty visited the Keeses in Brooklyn he spent part of one day "with Weldon and Ann walking around the Heights. Eventually, it became a kind of Hart Crane pilgrimage. They visited Crane's former home and then crossed the Brooklyn Bridge. At some point Getty asked Kees to pose for a picture. He obliged and leaned with his back up against the ornate ironwork of the rail, . . . with a view of lower Manhattan's skyscrapers in the background, seen through a web of bridge cables" (Reidel 181).

Weldon Kees on the Brooklyn Bridge, November 1948. Photograph by Norris Getty, courtesy of the Gertrude Stein Gallery.

This association of Brooklyn Heights with Crane—another poet who had drowned himself and whose body, never recovered, was never to end up as debris cast on shore by the tide—sets up the final image of "Travels in North America." The speaker is suddenly brought back into the present from his memory of Brooklyn Heights ten years earlier and, contemplating another map, says,



Hart Crane on the roof of 110 Columbia Heights, Brooklyn, c. 1924, the Brooklyn Bridge behind him. Courtesy of Columbia University Libraries, Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Here is Milpitas,
California, filling stations and a Ford
Assembly plant. Here are the washboard roads
Of Wellfleet, on the Cape, and summer light and dust.
And here, now textured like a blotter, like the going years

And difficult to see, is where you are, and where I am,
And where the oceans cover us. (Kees, *Collected* 118)

The image of "the washboard roads / Of Wellfleet, on the Cape, and summer light and dust" recalls the fact that though the Keeses lived most of the year in Brooklyn Heights they would drive to Cape Cod to spend the summer in Massachusetts. And having traversed North America from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific, Kees registers the fact that the characteristic American solution to temporal problems—the spatial solution of going West and starting over—doesn't work anymore. Like so many of the longer (of more than one page) poems in the last volume—e.g., "The Hourglass," "The Testimony of James Apthorp," "Saratoga Ending"—the one entitled "Travels in North America" is the monologue of someone who is coming to the end of his rope, the kind of poem that is typical of late Kees.

One of the best poems in Kees's last volume is "Guide to the Symphony," a parody of the kind of note that one reads in a concert program. The poem begins with a description of the instruments employed in the work—"Three flutes, two oboes, English horn, violins"—a typical list that ends with a direct comic observation: "And a contra-bassoon played by a worn-looking blonde" (Kees, *Collected* 106). Part of the poem's wit depends on the attempt to describe in words an art that is essentially non-verbal, and the lengths the author goes to to inject into his piece things that can be described in words even though they may have only a tangential relation to the symphony. Noting that the work is "classical in form," the speaker of the poem then proceeds to give a verbal reading of what the music means: "A wayward dance proceeds; the woodwind voices and the strings / Unite in *agitato* passages that state, // Some critics believe, 'Man's long revolt against the Higher Will.' " Oscillating among several registers the poem's speaker notes that after "Staccato notes, *fortissimo*, engage the clarinets": "The work is dissonant, 'though not excessively.' " Adapting the style of a program note, the poem's speaker mixes comments on instrumentation (always enclosed in parentheses)

with passages of interpretation that translate the music's meaning into words, combined with passages that comment on the different readings of the piece's sections.

At one point the speaker says, "And then the scherzo movement, / Lachrymose, so often thought to deal // With Western Man's religious hopes gone dim. / Drums; and the famous 'Wailing of the Damned' motif. (Bassoons.) / A horn sounds yearningly. A short ejaculation from the fifes. // Man's nature sweetens (key of B flat); and the reeds, / Augmented by an alto sax, pick up / A hopeful theme *(allegro moderato)*, though // Baumgarten writes that Koussevitsky used instead / A *moderato* beat." The fact that the famous "Wailing of the Damned" motif is orchestrated for bassoons is only one of the witty touches in these lines. The Koussevitsky the speaker mentions here is Serge Koussevitsky (1879–1955), conductor of the Boston Symphony from 1920 to 1949. Baumgarten is presumably the name of a music critic, perhaps one who writes for a newspaper much like the real person mentioned in Kees's other satiric art poem "Round" in which one of the recurring figures is the art critic Royal Cortissoz of the *New York Herald-Tribune*. "Guide to the Symphony" continues, "But now the gloom / Has deepened once again: the heckelphone implores // In 2/4 time, the cellos" (Kees, *Collected* 106–7). As the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music*, second edition, notes, the heckelphone is "a sort of baritone oboe, used by Strauss and Delius. It is usually written for in a treble clef an 8ve higher than it sounds (Possibly when some composers specify 'bass oboe' they mean this instrument.)" (Scholes 404c). The heckelphone is thus a baritone woodwind, and like the bassoon, another member of the same family of reed instruments, the fact that the heckelphone "implores" the cellos "in 2/4 time" is probably yet another witty touch. Kees was a jazz pianist, and as a musician would have appreciated that the time signature 2/4 indicated a march. The notion of the more or less martial cadence being able to "implore" a stringed instrument as mellow as a cello is clearly a musician's joke.

The subsequent lines in the poem continue the wit of having the

verbal descriptions of the music provide more specific information than any music could possibly convey:

> Morning. Pan awakens.
> Sunrise. Entrance of the false Messiahs. Here
> A surging countertheme, in E flat minor, and the oboes shrill.
>
> The specter of a dead waltz drifts
> In sleep. Bass flutes, violas, and the English horn
> Repeat the second theme, in fifths. Sad
>
> *Pizzicati* of the strings. A bell sounds and the violins
> Lash furiously, subside, diminishing.
> (All this in E flat major.) Clarinets sing plaintively.
>
> The last stroke of the hammer. (Tympani.) The sacred stag
> Is dead. Long anguished *tuttis* by the brass. A final roll of drums.
> It ends. The concertmaster rubs a little resin on his bow. (Kees, *Letters* 107)

As the poem ends, and the type of information that the music is said to convey becomes increasingly explicit as a narrative, the sense of the poem grows as a parody of the kind of explication of program music one reads at the symphony. One senses that the poem falls between Walt Disney's animated feature length film *Fantasia* (1940), which interprets classical music for the masses in terms of animation (with Mickey Mouse acting out Dukas's "Sorcerer's Apprentice"), and the 1957 Warner Bros. *Merrie Melodies* cartoon *What's Opera, Doc?*, starring Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd in a series of Wagnerian scenes in which Fudd, wearing a helmet with horns and a breast plate that is too large for him, pursues Bugs Bunny clad as a blonde-bewigged Wagnerian maiden. Throughout the cartoon, Fudd continually intones the opening notes of the "Ride of the Valkyries" with the words "Kill the wabbit! Kill the wabbit!". These popular versions suggest how opera and classical music were still considered in these years to be part of the general cultural consciousness, and thus part of the allusive background for a poem like Kees's "Guide to the Symphony."

Chapter Five

Kees, A Learned Poet

Like "Guide to the Symphony," Kees's "Abstracts of Dissertations" is essentially parodic. What it parodies is in effect the kind of specialized knowledge associated with certain learned professions, just as "Guide to the Symphony" parodies the kind of specialized knowledge exhibited for the masses in a newspaper review of a classical music performance. In both instances, the poems function by making this knowledge seem so specialized that it ultimately looks trivial. Also like "Guide," "Abstracts" is the sort of poem that would be written by a former reference librarian like Kees. "Abstracts of Dissertations" begins

> Andrea indicated he was not the first
> To doubt. In 1530 Bembo wrote a monograph.
> The years went by. P. de la Rue
> Rejected Virgil. Was this Frenchman's theory true?
>
> Consider it. J. Hildebrandt believed
> In a Virgilian nucleus. Skutsch added fuel

To the dispute; he mentioned Gallus' name.
He died. After a while the twentieth century came. (Kees, *Letters* 72)

The poem begins by listing philological scholars' varying opinions on the disputed authorship of a 414-line Latin poem called *Culex* ("The Gnat"), usually attributed to the poet Virgil. The poem tells the story of a shepherd who has driven his flock afield and who then lies down to take a nap. A huge serpent heads for the sleeping shepherd, intending to bite and kill him, but a gnat saves the shepherd by stinging him and waking him up. The shepherd slaps the gnat and kills it. Then he sees the snake, takes a branch, and kills it, too. Realizing that the gnat saved his life, the shepherd falls asleep once again. The gnat appears to him in a dream and delivers a lengthy harangue from the underworld. The shepherd awakens and builds an elaborate altar to the gnat with the following "epitaph": "Little Gnat, to thee, so well deserving, the guardian of the flocks pays this service of death in return for the boon of life" (Virgil 403).

In Kees's "Abstracts of Dissertations," I have not been able to identify with certainty the Andrea mentioned in the first line; he may be Andrea del Verrocchio, Andrea del Sarto, or Andrea Mantegna. Andrea del Verrocchio might be the best bet, as he was the sculptor of the famous late fifteenth-century bronze "Doubting Thomas." The Bembo mentioned in the second line, however, is clearly the great Italian humanist Pietro Bembo (1470–1547), who composed in 1503 (published in 1530) a dialogue titled *De Virgilli Culice et Terenti Fabulis*, the first part of which is concerned with the text and authenticity of *Culex*.

The next figure Kees cites, "P. de la Rue," would seem to be Charles de la Rue, writing under the Latin pen name Carolus Ruaeus, who lived from 1643 to 1725. He was a priest, so Kees's use of the initial P with a period ("P. de la Rue") may stand for the French word "pere." The next figure Kees cites is "Hildebrandt," who "believed / In a Virgilian nucleus." The Hildebrandt I have been able to locate had a first initial of R. for Richard rather than J. as in the Kees poem. Hildebrandt's *Studien auf Gebiete der Römichen Poesie und Metrik: I. Vergil's Culex* was reviewed by

Robinson Ellis in vol. I, no. 9 (November 1887) of *The Classical Review*. The next figure Kees mentions by name appears in the bibliography that H. Rushton Fairclough, professor of classical literature at Stanford University, places at the start of his Loeb Classical Library edition of the minor poems attributed to Virgil: he cites "Skutsch, *Aus Vergils Fruhzeit* (Leipzig, 1901, '06)" (Virgil 369). Kees notes in his poem that "Skutsch added fuel // To the dispute; he mentioned Gallus' name." In Fairclough's bibliographical headnote to Virgil's minor poems, he includes the following comment: "Impressed by the apparent force of the external evidence, J. W. Mackail is inclined to think that the *Culex* may have been written by Virgil as an exercise, and thus set aside before the poet had 'put the vitalising Virgilianising touches to it'…As to the *Ciris*, he agrees with Skutsch that this was wholly or mainly the work of Gallus not of Virgil" (Virgil 369).

Kees's poem continues:

> …After a while the twentieth century came,
>
> Which brought us Vollmer, arbitrary, blunt,
> Who said, "Authentic." Frank and Drew agreed.
> Mackail unmasked their subtle fallacies.
> Was this the end? Was there no more to hunt?
>
> The type swims, and one hurries past
> Fairclough's criteria, the Ovid mystery,
> And turns the page… (Kees, *Collected* 72)

In the bibliography that Fairclough appends to the beginning of Virgil's minor poems, we find entries on "Vollmer, 'Coniectanea,' in *Rheinisches Museum*, 1 v. (1900)" and "D. L. Drew's *Culex* (Oxford, 1925)" (Virgil 368–69). The Frank that Kees mentions in the line "Frank and Drew agreed" is clearly Tenney Frank, whom Fairclough cites in his endnote to the minor poems as "*Vergil: A Biography*, by Tenney Frank (New York, 1922)" (Virgil 524). (Tenney Frank taught at my university, Johns Hopkins, in the Latin Seminary, the forerunner of the Department of

Classics, from 1919 to 1939. Since I only came to Hopkins's Department of English in 1970, I never met him, but I knew people who had known him.) The reference to "the Ovid mystery" in Kees's poem is explained by the following comment in Fairclough's endnote to Virgil's minor poems: "In a notable series of papers, Professor R. S. Radford presents a mass of detailed evidence in support of the view that most, if not all, of the poems of the *Appendix* [the minor poems of Virgil] are really the work of Ovid" (Virgil 525). He continues, "If we give due weight to the detailed evidence gathered laboriously by Radford, we must conclude that the *Appendix* as a whole is either the work of Ovid or of some poet or poets thoroughly steeped in Ovid" (Virgil 525). And Fairclough notes that Radford's latest article, titled "The *Culex* and Ovid," is "really definitive, so far at least as in establishing the extraordinarily Ovidian character of the poem in respect to vocabulary, phraseology, metrical features, mythology, and imaginative atmosphere. 'There are in *Culex*,' says Radford (p. 80), 'fully 400 phrases, which are found also in Ovid, but *in no other poet* of the Golden Age (Lucretius to Ovid)' " (Virgil 527).

Fairclough concludes, "The *Culex* is the work not of Virgil but either of Ovid or of some poet amazingly like Ovid" (Virgil 527). The litany of proper names in Kees's poem, names of real classicists, ultimately lead to the conclusion that the name of the famous Latin poet to whom the authorship of the *Culex* is usually assigned is incorrect and though the poem is usually published under the name of Virgil, it is really a poem written by "Ovid" or by "some poet amazingly like Ovid."

Line 15 of Kees's poem—"And turns the page . . . New knee-jerk stimuli . . ."—introduces the poem's final six lines and returns us to the situation evoked by the poem's title: the activity of someone thumbing through the publication *Dissertation Abstracts* and noting the partial history of scholarly pursuits of learning inscribed there. Where the scholarly inquiries recorded in the poem's first three-and-a-half stanzas are all humanistic and present the last names of real scholars writing in a tradition about a single work, the list that constitutes the last six lines in Kees's poem is en-

tirely composed of the presumed titles or subjects of dissertations and no authors' names are given. According to Wikipedia, *Dissertation Abstracts*

> is a bibliography of American and international dissertations published by University Microfilms International (UMI) / ProQuest, Ann Arbor, since 1938. UMI has had an agitated life and the bibliographical data have often shifted owner and name, and therefore appears under different labels. It covers doctoral dissertations accepted at an accredited American institution since 1861 . . . The print version [of *Dissertation Abstracts*] is published monthly and cumulated annually . . . It is divided into three sections:
>
> Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences . . .
> Section B: Sciences and Engineering . . .
> Section C: (formerly *European Disertations*) . . . covers non-North American materials . . .

The speaker of Kees's poem is clearly someone who has worked as a reference librarian, as Kees had. And the point of the poem is the ongoing work of scholarship that accumulates around a piece of creative writing like *Culex* as compared with the turning of scholarship in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the physical and social sciences, when presumably the authority of individual authors becomes less important than the reproducibility of scientific results. That probably puts the best face on it, though this is also clearly the case of the satiric Kees poking fun at the field of library science in which he had once worked, as well as what he considers the essential triviality of the social sciences in general. The list runs from one "Andrea" who doubts that it is a work of Virgil's to H. R. Fairclough who includes it among Virgil's minor poems in the Loeb Classical Library even though he seems fairly convinced, judging by his footnotes, that it is not a work of Virgil's but of Ovid's. Clearly Fairclough has bowed to the traditional association of the poem with Virgil's name represented by the work's textual history. The only proper name of a person that appears in the last six lines of Kees's "Abstracts of Dissertations" is part of a title, "The Thought of Edward Smedley

Roach"—presumably the name of a science or social science dissertation. In researching Edward Smedley Roach, I find that there was an Edward Smedley (1788–1836) who was an English clergyman, a minor poet, and encyclopedia editor but I find no Edward Smedley Roach. I suspect that the name "Roach" was Kees's invention so that the third and fourth lines in stanza 5 would rhyme (Roach/Approach), as do the third and fourth lines in quatrains one (Rue/true), two (name/came), and four (stimuli/*hooveri*) of the poem. In stanza 3 the rhyme occurs in the first and fourth lines (blunt/hunt). Most of the other dissertation topics in line 17 through 20 look like they may be authentic science or social science subjects, but there is nothing in the ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global database which corresponds to the subject matters of the dissertations that Kees mentions. These dissertation topics likely represent subject matters which the satiric Kees probably invented.

We could say that Kees's poem is to some extent an example of the history of ideas or images. The poem's first fourteen lines list various classical scholars and their opinions; they begin by misidentifying the author of the poem as Virgil, a misidentification that insures this minor poem continues to receive critical attention until the author is correctly identified as another major poet, Ovid. This humanistic scholarly tradition that records the contributions of the individuals named and their opinions as to who the author of *Culex* really is apparently leads up to the moment in the nineteenth century (1861) when *Dissertation Abstracts* begins, the moment evoked by the fact that the topics listed in the last six lines of Kees's poem do not include the names of the human beings that made the contributions and wrote the dissertations. This humanistic tradition has apparently been self-correcting. It begins with most scholars apparently believing that *Culex* was written by Virgil but ends with the editor of Virgil in the Loeb Classical Library convinced that the author of the work is Ovid.

Kees's poem apparently records the *progress* of human knowledge as the authorship of a minor Latin poem is correctly discovered, but it also records the *regress* of that knowledge as the type of information recovered

becomes more the work of the social sciences and the names of the actual human discoverers cease to be part of the record. Part of this melancholy situation which the poem evokes depends on our sense of the way human knowledge continually overcomes itself as it progresses, deciding that what it believed true yesterday is wrong and having to face the possibility that what one is sure of today—which thus seems unquestionable—may prove in fact to be just as wrong tomorrow.

And all of these vicissitudes are what make up the contents of a library—the kind of cultural memory over which reference librarians preside. One would like to believe that anything the human mind, indeed any human mind, has ever discovered or learned is preserved, that it has never been lost over the course of time because it is contained in a library somewhere. But the reality is that without a card catalogue or an index of some sort, in short, without some system of retrieval, any piece of knowledge can become lost even *within* a library because of the sheer volume of things to be known. Knowledge, like any human product, is subject to human fads and fashions, to wrong turnings. Twenty years ago in subatomic physics, string theory was all the rage. Now one rarely hears about it, and the search for the ultimately uncuttable or indivisible particle seems like a dead end. Such a particle was supposed to represent the ultimate simplicity of the material world, but the theoretical search for it turned into an endeavor of ever-increasing complexity. Yet there were real individuals who devoted their entire careers to this inquiry. Kees's "Abstracts of Dissertations," like so many of his poems at a certain period of his life, records a feeling of futility about the entire project of human knowledge.

I don't find "Abstracts of Dissertations" to be a wholly successful poem. It is the type of work that one writes and includes in a collection because it provides the kind of information or creates the sort of pattern that makes other poems in the collection work. We can see its link to a poem like "Guide to the Symphony," where Kees includes the name of the real symphony director, Serge Koussevitsky, and a quotation from someone named Baumgarten. The quotation sounds as if it came from a newspaper

review (if the performance was live) or from the liner notes for a record album (if the performance was recorded). And the person quoted may be Jack Baumgarten, personal assistant to conductor Leopold Stokowski at the New York Philharmonic.

Another poem which seems to me more successful than "Abstracts of Dissertations," and which this type of poem resembles and thus brings to mind, is "The Lives." It begins

> "History is a grave and noble pagaent," Landor said.
> His family life at Gherardesca proved impossible.
> In 1844 his daughter gave him Pomero, a dog.
>
> The pictures blacken in their frames, the tassels on the bedspread
> Fall. "He laughs like an ogre," Mrs. Browning said,
> Who did not relish him the way her husband did. (Kees, *Collected* 96)

The Landor mentioned in line one is, of course, Walter Savage Landor (1775–1864), the nineteenth-century poet, whose family life "proved impossible" enough that he separated from his wife Julia permanently in 1835. The Mrs. Browning mentioned is the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the wife of the poet Robert Browning, who was a friend of Landor's. In stanzas 3 and 4, Kees mentions the names of Santayana, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Professor Norton, the last of these clearly being Professor Charles Eliot Norton of Harvard, who edited the abridged edition of Harvard president Charles Eliot's Five Foot Shelf of books. All three are mentioned as an expansion of the line "Stuffed animals and birds, antiques of plaster gave / A tone to Boston." Lines 11 and 12 of stanza 4 effect a strange linkage, joining Nietzsche, the nineteenth-century German philosopher and author of *Also Sprach Zarathustra!*, who died insane from the effects of neurosyphilis contracted from a prostitute, with Booth Tarkington, the twentieth-century American popular novelist who wrote *Penrod* and *Alice Adams*. This linkage (if not from the sublime to the ridiculous then from the sublime to the quotidian) recapitulates the feeling achieved in "Abstracts of Dissertations" when the list of real

classicists leads into the titles of twentieth-century dissertations that are missing the names of their authors. And this immediately gives way in "The Lives" to a return to the first line:

> "Well, history is a grave and noble pageant," Landor said.
> "Or 'stately pageant' is perhaps the term."
>
> On the neglected lawn, the iron dogs and the deer,
> Rusted among the weeds, alert, indomitable, keep watch.
> (Kees, *Collected* 96)

Landor and Mrs. Browning, Santayana, Longfellow, and Professor Norton, Nietzsche and Booth Tarkington—all of them were real people who once existed in the world, but now only persist as names in books or names of books that mainly exist in libraries. From the pictures (presumably of real people) "that blacken in their frames" to the cast-iron animals that rust on "the neglected lawn," the unliving, inanimate things persist while all the living things have died. This ultimately makes people who work in libraries (as Kees did) seem like those who work in mausoleums.

Another Kees poem that belongs in this category is "Round," which we discussed earlier, and which records the death of Royal Cortissoz, the art critic of the *New York Herald-Tribune*. And indeed we can say that few people today would remember his name were it not for its inclusion in Kees's poem.

Chapter Six

"Relating to Robinson"

Mystery and Literary Interpretation

One can see the way that these poems containing the proper names of real people ultimately lead up to Kees's best work—his four poems about a figure called Robinson. In many ways the culmination of Weldon Kees's poetic art is achieved in the four Robinson poems—"Robinson" (1945), "Aspects of Robinson" (1948), "Robinson at Home" (1948), and "Relating to Robinson" (1951). The earliest of these—"Robinson"—was first published in the fall of 1945 in *The New Yorker*, and suggests the extent to which the life of Hart Crane broods over these works. There is, of course, a fearful symmetry to the fates of Crane and Kees—the former drowned himself in the Atlantic in 1933 and the latter in the Pacific in 1955. The first Robinson poem evokes the earlier poet as an absence represented by his possessions:

> The mirror from Mexico, stuck to the wall
> Reflects nothing at all. The glass is black.
> Robinson alone provides the image Robinsonian.

Which is of all the room—walls, curtains,
Shelves, bed, the tinted photograph of Robinson's first wife,
Rugs, vases, panatellas in a humidor.
They would fill the room if Robinson came in. (Kees, *Collected* 59)

The first reference to Crane comes in the lines: "The mirror from Mexico, stuck to the wall / Reflects nothing at all." Crane took his own life on board a steamship, the SS *Orizaba*, on his way back from Mexico to New York City. After the disastrous year (1932–33) he had spent in Mexico on a Guggenheim Fellowship trying unsuccessfully to write an epic poem about the conquest of Montezuma by the conquistadors, Crane leapt into the sea from the stern of the *Orizaba* on April 27, 1932. His body was never recovered. The image of the black "mirror from Mexico" refers to the mirrors made of obsidian which the Aztec shamans used to look into the future. The evocation of Crane becomes even more explicit in the poem's close: "Outside, white buildings yellow in the sun. / Outside, the birds circle continuously"(Kees, *Collected* 59).

White Buildings was, of course, the name of Crane's first volume of poems, published in 1926. And the image of the birds circling recalls the moment in *Moby-Dick* when the Pequod is struck by the eponymous whale and goes down, a moment that Crane memorializes in the poem "At Melville's Tomb":

And wrecks passed without sound of bells,
The calyx of death's bounty giving back
A scattered chapter, livid hieroglyph,
The portent wound in corridors of shells.

Then in the circuit calm of one vast coil,
Its lashing charmed and malice reconciled,
Frosted eyes there were that lifted altars;
And silent answers crept across the stars. (Crane, *Buildings* 34)

In *Moby-Dick*, as the Pequod sinks, Melville writes

A sky-hawk that tauntingly had followed the main-truck downwards from its natural home among the stars, pecking at the flag,…there; this bird now chanced to intercept its broad fluttering wing between the hammer and the wood; and simultaneously feeling that etherial thrill, the submerged savage beneath, in his death-gasp, kept his hammer frozen there; and so the bird of heaven, with archangelic shrieks and its imperial beak thrust upwards, and his whole captive form folded in the flag of Ahab, went down with his ship, which like Satan, would not sink to hell till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her, and helmeted herself with it.

Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf. (Melville 713)

If the fate of the American poet Hart Crane hovers over the first of the Robinson poems, then what, we might ask, is the name of the poem's principal character Robinson meant to convey? Poet and critic Lawrence Joseph has suggested that the character is "a metamorphosis of both Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and the Robinson character in Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night*, published in 1932. Céline's Robinson—like Kees's—has no other name. He is a 'double' for the novel's narrator" (Joseph 102). I have never been persuaded by the Robinson Crusoe identification of the character, preferring instead wherever I taught the poem to invoke the name of the poet Edwin Arlington Robinson and thus the name of one of his most famous character poems, "Richard Cory," about a figure whom everyone envies:

In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head. (Williams 210)

This seemed to me a more appropriate identification, given the relationship of the Kees poem's recurring Robinson figure to the fate of the

poem's author. But I must admit that I am persuaded by Joseph's mention of the Robinson figure from Céline's novel. I agree that the Robinson character in that book clearly functions as a "double" of the narrator and acts out many of the possibilities that the narrator confronts. Near the end, the narrator thinks:

> But following Robinson in his adventures, I had developed a taste for shady undertakings. Already in New York when I couldn't sleep I racked my brain wondering if it mightn't be possible to go further and still further with Robinson. You sink, at first you're afraid in the darkness, but all the same you want to understand and after that you never leave the depths. But there is too much. You can't understand so many things at once. Life is too short. You don't want to be unjust to anyone. You have scruples, you hesitate to make snap judgments, and worst of all, you're afraid to die while you're hesitating because then you'd have been on earth for nothing whatsoever. And that's worst of all. (Sturrock 329)

If Robinson is a double of the narrator, then his death in the next to last chapter prepares us for the fact that the novel will end only five-and-a-half pages later. Robinson is shot by his onetime girlfriend Madelon while riding in the back of a taxi-cab, an act precipitated by his telling her "I don't want to be loved anymore . . . it disgusts me" (Sturrock 424), and "if you want the whole truth . . . everything, absolutely everything! disgusts me and turns my stomach! Not just you! Everything! . . . And love most of all!" (Sturrock 425). This desire not to be loved serves as a hidden key signature for the somber music of so many of Kees's poems. One thinks of the early "For My Daughter," which begins as if it were a doting father's fond reminiscence of a beloved daughter:

> Looking into my daughter's eyes I read
> Beneath the innocence of morning flesh
> Concealed, hintings of death she does not heed. (Kees, *Collected* 14)

The poem then goes on to imagine all the things that can go wrong in the daughter's life:

Parched years that I have seen
That may be hers appear: foul, lingering
Death in certain war, the slim legs green.
Or, fed on hate, she relishes the sting
Of others' agony; perhaps the cruel
Bride of a syphilitic or a fool. (Kees, *Collected* 14)

The poem abruptly concludes "These speculations sour in the sun. / I have no daughter. I desire none" (Kees, *Collected* 14).

The poem strikingly represents the tone that will become characteristic of so many of Kees's best works, a tone that seems to make the fact of the poet's eventual suicide no surprise. In a Kees poem it is never a question of whether we win or lose. We all lose. We all die, and death is an annihilation. The only question is whether, having this knowledge, it is possible ever to win, whether there is any viable form of survival.

In the next Robinson poem, "Aspects of Robinson" (first published in *The New Yorker* issue of April 24, 1948), Kees evokes the inevitable wearing down of the poem's eponymous central figure by the repetitions of modern urban life:

Robinson at cards at the Algonquin; a thin
Blue light comes down once more outside the blinds.
Gray men in overcoats are ghosts blown past the door.
The taxis streak the avenues with yellow, orange, and red.
This is Grand Central, Mr. Robinson. (Kees, *Collected* 129)

The poem apparently begins with the breaking up of a poker game in a room at the Algonquin Hotel, located at 59 West 44th Street in New York City. They have apparently been playing all night because the "blue light" of dawn is breaking outside the blinds. The fact that the taxi cabs are painted a combination of yellow, orange, and red marks this as the 1940s or early 1950s when most New York taxis were painted these three colors. And since the cab driver apparently points out Grand Central Station, located at 89 East 42nd Street, one wonders if Robinson

has walked from the nearby Algonquin to Grand Central Station to get a cab.

At the beginning of the poem's second stanza, Hart Crane makes an oblique appearance: "Robinson on a roof above the Heights; the boats / Mourn like the lost." For a time in the 1920s, Crane lived at 110 Columbia Heights in the Brooklyn Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn, and perhaps the most famous photograph of Crane shows him on the roof of that building with the Brooklyn Bridge in the background. The rest of the stanza makes it clear that this is a later, different time, and just a bit smarmy: "Through sounds of ice cubes dropped in glass, an osteopath, // Dressed for the links, describes an old Intourist tour" (Kees, *Collected* 129). But with the next line, the specter of Hart Crane returns: "Here's where old Gibbons jumped from, Robinson." Though the well-known photograph of Crane associates him with a rooftop in Brooklyn, he did not jump from there but from the stern of a ship. The poet who jumped from a bridge is, of course, Weldon Kees. The poem's more current leap from a height is set up with an image of an osteopath, a popular but somewhat questionable type in the 1940s. The fact that this figure is an avid golfer, like many more reputable MDs, and that he has also been on an Intourist tour (Intourist being the Soviet travel agency that arranged all tours of the Soviet Union in the 1950s), makes this osteopath seem someone who is clearly "with it." This further characterizes the circles (the general tawdriness of the milieu) in which Robinson moves. The poem then evokes Robinson at the zoo in Central Park "admiring the elephant." He buys two newspapers—the *New York Herald-Tribune* and the *New York Times*—suggesting that this is his Sunday reading. And we hear Robinson's half of a telephone conversation: " 'Hello. Yes, this is Robinson. Sunday / At five? I'd love to. Pretty well. And you?' / Robinson alone at Longchamps staring at the wall" (Kees, *Collected* 123)

Longchamps was the name of a chain of restaurants in New York City in the late 1940s and early 1950s. It took its name from the murals that adorned its walls, which were large versions of Degas's paintings of Longchamps race track in France. My first trip to New York City must

have been in the summer of 1941; the surviving photos show me as a babe in arms. The first vacation there that I can remember must have been in the summer of 1946. We always had dinner at a restaurant near our hotel, a restaurant called Caruso's. It was named for the famous opera singer, who was reportedly a co-owner. I remember it as being in a basement and that one descended a long flight of stairs to get to the dining area. All the tables had red and white checked table cloths and Chianti bottles with candles stuck in them. My favorite dish was chicken and spaghetti. Then on subsequent visits to New York City we found that Caruso's had closed, so we ate at Childs'. Another chain of eating places in the city, Childs' was the setting for one of the scenes in F. Scott Fitzgerald's story "May Day," which was published in 1920. Our last trip as a family to New York City, my father's home town, was in the summer of 1955, and we ate several meals at Longchamps, where we stared at the murals on the walls.

From the end of the Second World War to the early 1950s we went to New York City every summer to visit my father's relatives, and we always stayed at hotels in the Broadway area—the Lincoln, the McAlpin, and in 1955 the Taft, which was just down the street from the Café Metropole, where there was always a jazz band playing on top of the bar. I would stand outside and watch them through a large plate glass window, and I recall that on this occasion the drummer Gene Krupa led the band there.

The poem's abrupt transition, from Robinson accepting a telephone invitation to a Sunday party to his eating by himself at Longchamps, sets up the poem's melancholy fourth stanza:

> Robinson afraid, drunk, sobbing Robinson
> In bed with a Mrs. Morse. Robinson at home;
> Decisions: Toynbee or luminol? Where the sun
> Shines, Robinson in flowered trunks, eyes toward
> The breakers. Where the night ends, Robinson in East Side bars.
> (Kees, *Collected* 129)

In a characteristic example of Keesian wit, Robinson, at home preparing for bed, must decide which is the surer soporific: reading the English

historian Arnold Toynbee or taking the sleeping tablet luminol. The last stanza of "Aspects of Robinson" employs a device similar to that which ends the earlier Robinson poem. There Kees enumerates the contents of Robinson's apartment in Robinson's absence, and in "Aspects of Robinson" he lists the items of Robinson's wardrobe:

> Robinson in Glen plaid jacket, Scotch-grain shoes,
> Black four-in-hand and oxford button-down,
> The jeweled and silent watch that winds itself, the brief-
> Case, covert topcoat, clothes for spring, all covering
> His sad and usual heart, dry as a winter leaf. (Kees, *Collected* 129)

Like the relationship of "For My Daughter" to the first Robinson poem, the darkening of Kees's mood, apparent in "Aspects of Robinson," is strikingly paralleled in his poem "River Song" (1946–47):

> By the public hook for the private eye,
> Near the neutral river where the children were,
> I was hung for the street, to watch the sky.
>
> When they strung me there, I waved like a flag
> Near the bright blue river where the children played,
> And my smile became part of the cultural lag.
>
> I named three martyrs. My mother came
> To the grayish river where the children stared:
> "My son, you have honored the family name."
>
> I was happy. Then a parade went by
> Near the shadowy river where the children waved,
> And the uniforms made me shiver and cry. (Kees, *Collected* 78)

The poem seems to record the growing realization of the cold war: that the Soviet army, which had liberated large areas of middle Europe from Nazi domination, was bringing a cruel tyranny of its own:

I tried to get down. What I had learned
Near the sunless river where the children screamed
Was only pain. My ropemarks burned. (Kees, *Collected* 78)

In the second lines of the concluding three stanzas the children "failed," "cried," and "died," creating a hopeless ending to this disturbing scenario.

In the next Robinson poem, "Robinson At Home," we encounter once again a list, not of the contents of his apartment as in the first Robinson poem nor of his wardrobe, as in "Aspects of Robinson," but of his dreams at night:

These are the rooms of Robinson.
Bleached, wan, and colorless this light, as though
All the blurred daybreaks of the spring
Found an asylum here, perhaps for Robinson alone,

Who sleeps. Were there more music sifted through the floors
And moonlight of a different kind,
He might awake to hear the news at ten,
Which will be shocking, moderately.

This sleep is from exhaustion, but his old desire
To die like this has known a lessening.
Now there is only this coldness that he has to wear.
But not in sleep.—Observant scholar, traveller,

Or uncouth bearded figure squatting in a cave,
A keen-eyed sniper on the barricades,
A heretic in catacombs, a famed roué,
A beggar on the streets, the confidant of Popes—

All these are Robinson in sleep, who mumbles as he turns,
"There is something in this madhouse that I symbolize—
This city—nightmare—black—" (Kees, *Collected* 136)

One senses in this last line the influence of Baudelaire and his imagery of a great nineteenth-century city as a nightmare landscape. Kees's poem concludes

> He wakes in sweat
> To the terrible moonlight and what might be
> Silence. It drones like wires far beyond the roofs,
> And the long curtains blow into the room. (Kees, *Collected* 136)

The fact that Robinson wakes "in sweat" belies the assertion that the content of his dreams is a saving alternative to the terrible monotony of his waking life. And the reverberations of a huge city, even late at night—"and what might be / Silence. It drones like wires far beyond the roofs"—suggests that the realities of the waking world are always present, waiting to confront him as he emerges from sleep.

Even Kees's reminiscence of a happy childhood is shadowed by events that lie in the future. In his poem "1926," Kees remembers coming home from seeing a movie starring Milton Sills and Doris Kenyon in 1926, when Kees was twelve years old. The idyllic first stanza—

> The porchlight coming on again,
> Early November, the dead leaves
> Raked in piles, the wicker swing
> Creaking. Across the lots
> A phonograph is playing *Ja-Da.*

—sets up the shock of the second stanza as the poem's adult speaker suddenly recalls things that are far from idyllic:

> I see the lives
> Of neighbors, mapped and marred
> Like all the wars ahead, and R .
> Insane, B. with his throat cut,
> Fifteen years from now, in Omaha.

And just as suddenly the adult speaker is back recalling himself at age 12:

I did not know them then.
My airedale scratches at the door.
And I am back from seeing Milton Sills
And Doris Kenyon. Twelve years old.
The porchlight coming on again. (Kees, *Collected* 104)

Milton Sills and Doris Kenyon, silent picture actors, starred together in several films in the 1920s. Kenyon was married to Milton Sills from 1926 until his sudden death from a heart attack in 1930 while the forty-eight-year-old actor was playing tennis with his wife. Their movie, *Men of Steel*, the last of Milton Sills's four starring films in 1926, turns upon a character, Jan Bokak (Sills), a self-educated steel worker wrongfully accused of a murder he didn't commit. Kees's reference to Doris Kenyon and Milton Sills in the poem seems meant to invoke the image of Sills's sudden death as a prefiguration of the unforeseen events which Kees recalls in the second stanza, i.e., "the lives / Of neighbors, mapped and marred / Like all the wars ahead, and R. / Insane, B. with his throat cut, / Fifteen years from now, in Omaha." In "1926," the sudden death in 1930 of the movie star Milton Sills is an event still four years in the future, and thus something unknown and unexpected by the poem's twelve-year-old protagonist—it is a situation that prefigures the one in the subsequent stanza, where the adult Kees considers the sudden and sometimes violent deaths of people he knows, deaths that also lie in the future for the twelve-year-old speaker of the poem. The surprise for the contemporary reader comes when he understands that the mention of Sills and Kenyon anticipates the unexpected deaths Kees records in the second stanza. And the final surprise comes in the last stanza when we suddenly find ourselves back again with our twelve-year-old protagonist in 1926, ignorant of both sets of future events, just as most readers are of the most significant future events in our own lives.

"Relating to Robinson," the final one in the series, is the only one of the Robinson poems not published in *The New Yorker*. The first three Robinson poems appeared in the October 6, 1945, April 10, 1948, and April

24, 1948 issues of the magazine, while "Relating to Robinson" was first published in the summer 1950 issue of the magazine *Furioso*. Though the speaker of the first three Robinson poems is unnamed, the sorts of things he reports about Robinson's thoughts and feelings make clear that he is a double of Robinson, but the fourth poem, "Relating to Robinson" is slightly different. First, it is not set in Robinson's apartment like the first three, but in the street outside:

> Somewhere in Chelsea, early summer;
> And, walking in the twilight toward the docks,
> I thought I made out Robinson ahead of me. (Kees, *Collected* 148)

The Chelsea section of New York City is a neighborhood in the southwestern part of Manhattan Island. Its northern border is West 34th Street, its eastern border is 6th Avenue, and its western border is the docks on the Hudson River. If the speaker is in Chelsea, "walking in the twilight toward the docks," he is walking west toward the river when he thinks he sees Robinson but can't be sure. He hears the sound of a radio playing through an open window. The tune is Rodgers and Hart's "There's a Small Hotel" from their 1936 musical *On Your Toes*, a romantic song that seems to make the meeting with the figure who may be Robinson even more uncanny:

> There's a small hotel
> With a wishing well
> I wish that we were there
> Together.
>
> There's a bridal suite,
> One room, bright and neat,
> Complete for us to share
> Together. (Hart and Kimball, 222–23)

A duet between two characters named Junior and Frankie, the song was introduced in the original 1936 production by Ray Bolger and Doris

Carson. It is a song of two people daydreaming about their future together, which will include a wedding and honeymoon. The song is optative in mood, expressing the hope or wish that the couple's ultimate union will be like this, a situation contrary to fact that is perhaps made clearer in the song's verse immediately preceding the refrain:

Frankie: I'd like to get away, Junior,
Somewhere alone with you.
It could be oh, so gay, Junior!
You need a laugh or two.

Junior: A certain place I know, Frankie,
Where funny people can have fun.
That's where we two will go, darling,
Before you can count up
One, two, three.
For . . .

As an ironic counterpoint, the lyrics suggest Robinson's and thus the speaker's isolation and loneliness. Furthermore, by expressing the happy anticipation of a couple's union on a honeymoon, the reference to the song complicates the meaning of the speaker's meeting with his double by the Hudson River.

Kees's poem, "Relating to Robinson," continues:

Under a sign for Natural Bloom Cigars,
While lights clicked softly in the dusk from red to green,
He stopped and gazed into a window
Where a plaster Venus, modeling a truss,
Looked out at Eastbound traffic. (But Robinson,
I knew, was out of town: he summers at a place in Maine,
Sometimes on Fire Island, sometimes the Cape,
Leaves town in June and comes back after Labor Day.)
And yet, I almost called out, "Robinson!" (Kees, *Collected* 148)

This situation suggests that the poem's speaker is unsure whether the figure he sees on the street is Robinson or not, and thus suggests that "Robinson" has become something symbolic of whatever is amiss in the speaker's psyche. The speaker's fairly exact knowledge of Robinson's summer whereabouts reinforces the sense that Robinson is a double figure or that at least he is such in the speaker's mind. The "sign for Natural Bloom Cigars" and the "plaster Venus, modeling a truss," suggest that the figure who may be Robinson is looking in the window of a drugstore. But the phallic cigar and the statue of the goddess of love modeling a hernia-relieving device suggest a material reality that undercuts the romantic sentiments of "There's a Small Hotel." The poem continues:

> Just as I passed,
> Turning my head to search his face,
> His own head turned with mine
> And fixed me with dilated, terrifying eyes
> That stopped my blood. His voice
> Came to me like an echo in the dark.
>
> "I thought I saw the whirlpool opening.
> Kicked all night at a bolted door.
> You must have followed me from Astor Place.
> An empty paper floats down at the last.
> *And a day as huge as yesterday in pairs*
> *Unrolled its horror on my face*
> *Until it blocked—"* Running in sweat
> To reach the docks, I turned back
> For a second glance. I had no certainty,
> There in the dark, that it was Robinson
> Or someone else.

The detail of the voice coming at him "like an echo in the dark" confirms the sense that Robinson or whoever this is that the speaker takes to be Robinson is a double of the speaker—the figures of Narcissus and

Echo being respectively the mythological types of visual and vocal doubling. Another indication of this doubling is that as the speaker turns his face to observe the figure, the figure turns as well to face him. The Astor Place mentioned by the figure is a short street, just two blocks long, in lower Manhattan. According to Wikipedia, it runs from Broadway west "just below East 8th Street; through Lafayette Street, past Cooper Square and Fourth Avenue; and ends at Third Avenue, continuing as St. Mark's Place." It was named for John Jacob Astor, who was the richest person in the United States in the early nineteenth century. Astor died in 1848, and the street was named for him soon after. Once the most high-class residential area in Manhattan, Astor Place had fallen into disrepair by the beginning of the twentieth century. The fact that the figure who may be Robinson says that the poem's speaker has followed him from Astor Place is very much of a piece with the general sense of decline one gets from the other Robinson poems. The double figure ends by quoting lines from an Emily Dickinson poem, "The first Day's Night had come" (no. 410):

The first Day's Night had come—
And grateful that a thing
So terrible—had been endured—
I told my Soul to sing—

She said the strings were snapt—
Her bow—to Atoms blown—
And so to mend her—gave me work
Until another Morn—

And then—a Day as huge
As Yesterdays in pairs,
Unrolled its horror in my face—
Until it blocked my eyes—

My Brain—begun to laugh—
I mumbled—like a fool—

And tho' 'tis Years ago—that Day—
My Brain keeps giggling—still.

And Something's odd—within—
That person that I was—
And this One—do not feel the same—
Could it be Madness—this?

The fact that these lines from the Dickinson poem occur to Kees's speaker at this point raises the question of whether the speaker feels that he himself is going mad; and it accords with his "running in sweat" till he reaches the river—an uncanny prefiguration of Kees's own fate. The poem's final lines, like the endings of some of the other Robinson poems, seem to represent the return of the speaker's consciousness to a melancholy if precarious equilibrium after the crisis of his ventriloquizing the words of the double:

The block was bare. The Venus,
Bathed in blue fluorescent light,
Stared toward the river. As I hurried West,
The lights across the bay were coming on.
The boats moved silently and the low whistles blew. (Kees, *Collected* 149)

Like the ending of some of the other Robinson poems, a sudden moment of self-destructive madness is succeeded by a calm, almost offbeat, return to a depressing reality. As we said, the speaker is walking west towards the river uncannily anticipating Kees's own westward journey that will end in San Francisco Bay. Kees was a jazz pianist and a writer of jazz songs, so it is safe to assume that he knew the work of Jimmy Noone, the great black jazz clarinetist of the 1920s and early '30s. If so, it is also likely that he knew Noone's recording of "Ready for the River," some of whose lines run "Made my will, wrote some notes. / Gonna keep awalkin' till my straw hat floats. / I say, I'm ready for the river, that shivery river, / So get that river ready for me." As early as 1944, Kees had begun to think

about the effect that the mysterious disappearance of an author has on the subsequent interpretation of his work. As Kees's biographer James Reidel notes, "In November [1943], Kees obtained tear sheets of 'The Evening of the Fourth of July' for Henry Volkening," his literary agent, "to show to publishers. 'If there was interest,' Kees told him, he would consider a new novel" (Reidel 137):

> When no offers came, Volkening, in February 1944, convinced his client to write a synopsis that he could circulate along with the tear sheets, and Kees typed out a synopsis for a literary potboiler about the shadowy life of a minor poet, one part detective novel and one part Citizen Kane.
>
> Kees invented a biographer's search for a vanished poet, his biographer one Carl Ellis, a scholar at "loose ends" who finds a volume of poems by a writer named Frederic Shore Strandquist. The book is fascinating and little known—the stuff of a literary discovery. Yet it is Strandquist's mysterious life that "greatly excites" Ellis's curiosity after he learns that this family black sheep has not been seen for fifteen years and that his family is "not sure (or willing to tell) whether he is alive or dead."
>
> The plot, as Kees imagined it, would have had the same chase excitement as Alfred Hitchcock's *The Thirty-nine Steps* or Graham Greene's screenplays of *The Orient Express*, *This Gun for Hire*, and *The Ministry of Fear*. As the details of Strandquist's life snowball, a trail leads toward a climax in which Ellis learns that Strandquist is still alive. The reader would have been confronted by the uncertainty of being, by the notion that there is no real or secure contingent act of interpretation to undo uncertainty. Carl Ellis's search for Frederic Shore Strandquist would have revealed that the task of fully discovering and understanding another human being is "an impossibility." (Reidel 137)

Indeed, a last sentence that could serve as an epigraph for the entire corpus of Robinson poems. Since no body was ever recovered in the case of Kees's disappearance, the line raises the further question of the actual circumstances of Kees's vanishing. What seems clear is that at least ten years before his own disappearance, Kees had begun to think about

the implications of such an act, had begun to consider the way such a mystery could kick-start a writer's reputation or at the very least attract attention to his work.

By the time of the fourth Robinson poem, it becomes clear that the real point of the suite of four works is the psychological, not to say mental, state of their speaker for whom Robinson serves as a double figure. The very title of the final poem, "Relating to Robinson," suggests a growing distance from the figure. This distance is represented by the fact that this is the only poem in the sequence that begins and ends outside of Robinson's apartment, and that raises the possibility that the person whom the speaker encounters in the street outside may not in fact be Robinson:

> I had no certainty,
> There in the dark, that it was Robinson
> Or someone else. (Kees, *Collected* 149)

Which is to say, the poem raises the possibility that the name "Robinson" has come to symbolize something in the speaker's own self that haunts and pursues him.

It is worth noting that Kees's friend, Norris Getty, to whom Kees had sent an early draft of the poem, "felt strongly," Reidel observes,

> about keeping intact the "eeriness and uncertainty" needed "right through to those peaceful lines at the end." His friend had nearly spoiled the effect in the final stanza with a line that read: "The man had looked / Enough like Robinson to be his twin." "To me," Getty advised, "that seems to state pretty definitely that it wasn't Robinson after all, just someone who looked like him, and this lets the poem down a good deal." A few days later, Kees thanked Getty for the help: "You fixed on the very spot in the poem about which I was queasy." (Reidel 189)

The poem ends with its speaker hurrying West "toward the river" as "The lights across the bay were coming on" while "The boats moved silently and the low whistles blew" (Kees 149).

The overall effect of Kees's poems is to leave one with the feeling

that one has not been lied to, that no promises have been made that are based more on human longing than on the reality of our situation. At its best, Kees's poetry is bleak and exhilarating. It is the poetry of reality—of simian-related beings abandoned on a relatively small, highly-favored rock, absolutely alone, as far as we can tell, in a vast uninhabited universe, beings whose relative size is so out of proportion to their cosmic surroundings and to their temporal ambitions as to be almost laughable. What can one do in a case like that except make poems, Kees seems to think.

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